サイコメ

PSYCOME

4

殺人忌と裏盆会を

水城水城

illustration

生煮え

Mizuki Mizushiro

x

Namanie

PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY

ファミ通文庫

サイコメ

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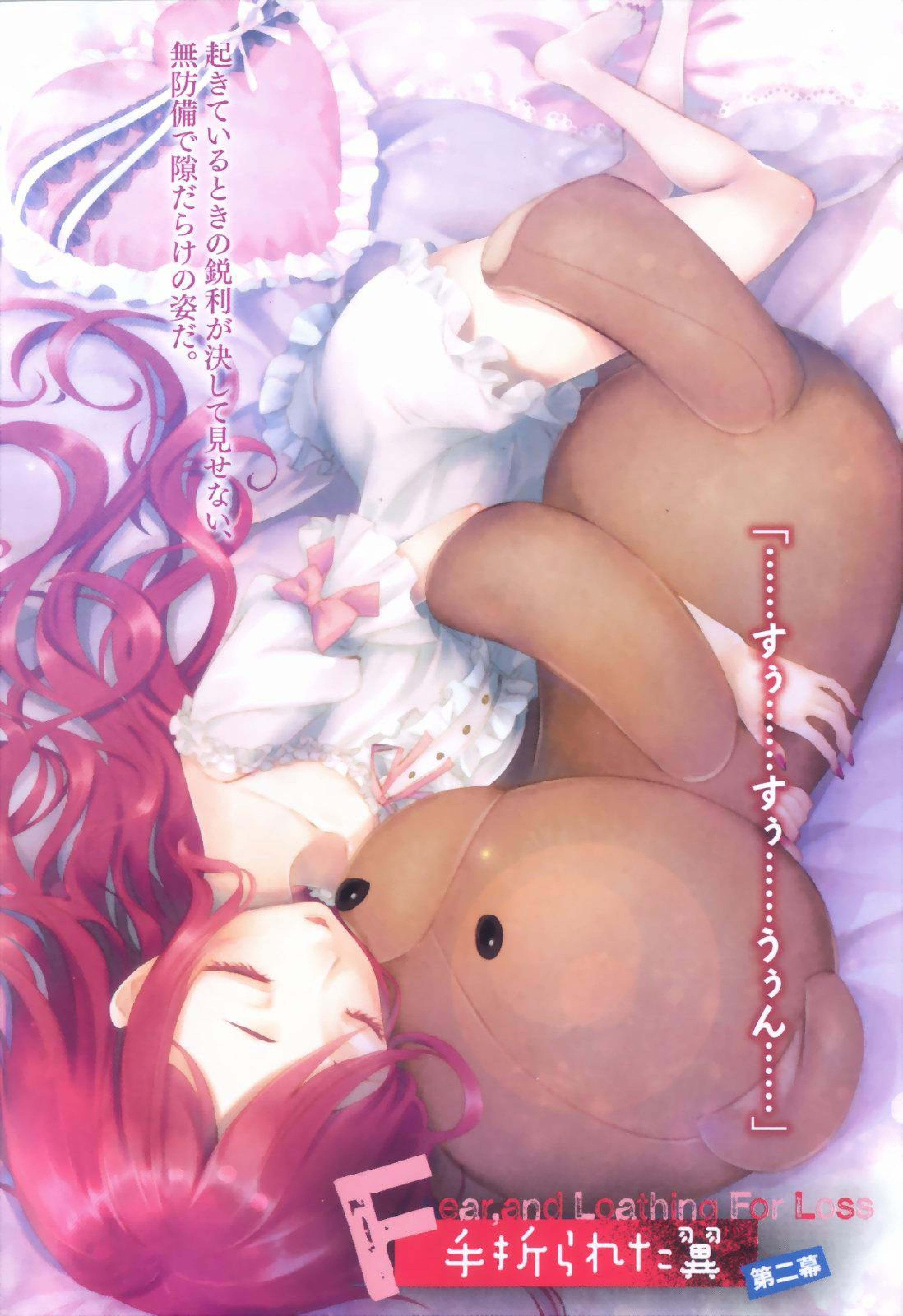
殺人忌と
裏盆会を

「死んでください」
紅羽神楽
Kagura Akabane
紅羽 繚
Ryou Akabane
「首を刎ねたんだ」
「ちょきんって！」
紅羽 乱
Ran Akabane
「おかえりなさい、鋭利。久しぶりに顔が見られて嬉しいわ」
紅羽芙蓉
Fuyou Akabane
「はい、死んだ」
紅羽刃更
Basara Akabane

The whole families of Akabane

紅羽家の一族

「めちゃくちゃ楽しそうじゃないかぁー！　私たちも早く混ざろう、京輔!?」
「うわっ!?　バカ、引っ張るんじゃ――」
「ほらほら、乗り遅れちゃうよ!?　早く早くっ、お兄ちゃんっ！」
イチゴ
メロン
Scarlet Scared The Sky
錆び朽ちた空
第三幕



「……すぅ……すぅ……うぅん……」

起きているときの鋭利が決して見せない、無防備で隙だらけの姿だ。

Fear,and Loathing For Loss
手折られた翼
第二幕

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水城水城

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目次
Contents

PSYCHO
LOVE
COMEDY

illustration:生煮え

開幕 Introduction 005

第一幕 血塗られた籠
Blood Stain Cage 021

第二幕 手折られた翼
Fear,and Loathing For Loss 123

第三幕 錆び朽ちた爪
Scarlet Scared The Sky 239

閉幕 Outroduction 302

裏・盂蘭盆会 Secret Track 311

Opening Scene - Introduction

There was only a week or so left before the summer vacation. It was the Monday right before the end of term.

On that day, at the entrance to the old building at the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation, a noisy crowd of students had gathered. The scene stank from the sweat after penal labor.

"...What goes around comes around."

Taking off his trainers to change into indoor shoes, Kyousuke gulped. His reasons for sweating were not limited to simply the heat and the great amount of physical exertion. This sweat was sliding down his back.

"It'll be fine, Onii-chan! Don't worry."

"Yeah, okay... I guess you're right. I've given it my best shot, so I guess things'll be okay?"

Kyousuke's beloved little sister--Ayaka--was cheering for him. Steeling his resolve, he started walking. Towards the noticeboard up ahead, in front of the shoe lockers, crowded beyond recognition.

On that noticeboard, a giant piece of paper had covered up almost the entire panel, stuck there ostentatiously. This was making the tension in his heart rising nonstop.

"Ah. Kyousuke-kun, Ayaka-chan!"

Standing in the last row, a girl noticed the Kamiya siblings and turned her head back, widening her large, flaxen-colored eyes. The girl had her hands held together before her chest like praying. Kyousuke answered "oh" to her and raised his hand--

"Good morning, Maina."

"G-Good mowning... Auau."

" "...?" "

Feeling the stammer in Maina's speech, Kyousuke and Ayaka exchanged glances.

"What's with you, Cun-chan? Did your results fall short of expectations?"

"N-No! My results weren't especially good or bad, rather, I think they're quite good already and I tried very hard the whole time--"

As though facing some kind of obstacle, Maina stopped talking mid-sentence. Then she looked to the left. The Kamiya siblings followed her gaze and froze together in sync.

"...Fu... Fufu... Fufufufufu..."

A girl was staring up at the piece of paper in shock as though all the cells in her body had been sucked empty, leaving her entire body rooted to the spot.

With empty eyes, she could do nothing but laugh awkwardly. A fallen schoolbag was lying at her feet.

"Eiri, Eiri! Pull yourself together, Eiriiiiiiiii!"

The girl had already reached a soulless state. Someone standing on the other side kept shaking her shoulder violently. It was Renko, wearing her black gas mask every day as usual. No matter how hard she shook, Eiri remained unresponsive.

With a stupid smile on her face, Eiri was totally in a vulnerable state. Despite her usually cool and detached demeanor, her coolness had totally disappeared right now.

Exclaiming "s-so pitiful...", Ayaka raised her hands to cover her mouth. In a sobbing tone of voice, Maina went "Eiri-chan..." Finally, Renko cried "Uwahhhhhhhhh!", begging her to come back to her senses.

Seeing Eiri in a sight too pitiful to behold, Kyousuke suddenly felt a foreboding feeling scurry across his heart.

"Hey, I'm just guessing here, but is it possible that she--"

"Sob sob. How could this... How could this happen, Eiri!? I clearly spent so much effort to teach you, why...? Why did this happennnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!?"

Turning away from the crying and sobbing Renko, Kyousuke took a deep breath.

Then he looked at the prime suspect responsible for this tragedy--the noticeboard.

Pasted there were the results for the *final exams* taken a week earlier.[1]

Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation's First Term Finals Ranking (Sum of 10 Subjects)

No.1	Year 1 Class B	Hikawa Renko	1000	
No.2	Year 1 Class A	Saotome Shinji	989	
No.3	Year 1 Class A	Kamiya Ayaka	982	
No.4	Year 1 Class B	Akutsu Mari	920	
No.5	Year 1 Class B	Gouriki Ayame	868	
No.6	Year 1 Class A	Kamiya Kyousuke	855	
~~omitted~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~				
No.15	Year 1 Class A	Igarashi Maina	794	
No.15	Year 1 Class B	Andou Chihiro	794	
~~omitted~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~				
No.32	Year 1 Class A	Akabane Eiri	305	die die die die die die die die die
No.33	Year 1 Class A	Sakagami Touma	0	die die die die die die die die die die

"Man, I tried so hard and still got only No.6! Top three is impossible."

"Weird... Eh, third place? No way~~!?"

Confronted with surprisingly good and bad results respectively, the two were shocked. The sibling's reactions happened to be opposites. Soon, their gazes were drawn to the same spot.

"By the way, managing to get first place... That's so amazing. No normal brain can get full marks at 1000, right?"

"Renko-san, you're so awesome~! As expected of Onii-chan's wife!"

"Like I said, she's not my wife--"

"Foosh--"

"Compared to her..."

"--------"

Subjected to Ayaka's gaze of disdain, Eiri was still staring at her own result with hollow eyes.

Ranked thirty-two out of thirty-three. A total of 305 after summing up all ten subjects.

The number of times "die" was written next to the total was the number of subjects failed.

"Hawawa. Eiri-chan, w-w-w-w-w-who knows what will happen to her...?"

Having managed average results, Maina commented with a face full of worry.

Before the final exams, the homeroom teacher had said the following:

"Don't mistakenly think you're getting away simply with exam papers marked red all over."

...So because of that, it was anyone's guess whether she would be fine or not.

The Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation was the educational institution specializing in lessons for convicted murderers as students. It was beyond what common sense could predict.

Action taken might be totally ruthless, she was going to be killed--It was almost certain that Eiri would become a blood sacrifice given her great number of failed subjects.

"E-Eiri--"

"Sorry."

Just as Kyousuke felt compelled to try to talk to her, Eiri apologized.

Finally back to her senses from that state of despondency, she swept her gaze across everyone--

"Sorry... Looks like my life is ending here. Everyone, thank you for taking care of me all this time. Although it's only been four months since I started school here, it was quite fun. I'm very happy I could spend my time together with you guys. I'm really grateful. Then it's time for goodbye... Live well, including my share as well. You must graduate safely, okay? I will cheer for you guys from the afterlife."

Eiri was smiling with complete despair.

" " "............" " "

The sight of her smile was heartbreaking. No one present knew how to react.

"--Okay, time to go."

Lightly pushing away Renko who was hugging her own arms motionlessly, Eiri picked up her fallen schoolbag.

Then in an extremely unnatural and refreshing tone of voice, she said:

"Standing here like logs isn't a solution. We'd better hurry back to the classroom, right? We must enjoy the final bit of time properly! Before summer arrives, I want to make some happy memories... Once the supplementary lessons begin, I won't have anything left except a painful life even worse than death! Aha... Ahahahahahahaha... Ahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Her entire person was laughing madly without any glint of light in her rust-red eyes. Not daring to face Eiri's pitiful appearance directly, Kyousuke had no choice but to turn his face away.

"...Didn't we promise that none of us are going to die?"

"Eiri-san is broken..." Ayaka trembled while speaking, whereas Maina said "E-Eiri-chan...", unable to hold back a great amount of tears. On the other hand, Renko collapsed to sit on the floor.

"Hmm-hmm-h~mm♪"

Forgetting Kyousuke's group, Eiri walked to the classroom alone, humming a tune while skipping with light footsteps, receding into the distance. Watching her back, Kyousuke really had no idea what to say.

× × ×

After school...

In the almost deserted classroom, Kyousuke and his friends were still very worried about Eiri.

"That girl, is she really going to survive...?"

Kyousuke wondered quietly while looking up at the sky beyond the barred window. After what happened at the noticeboard, Eiri had received her exam paper back during class. She acted cheerfully the whole time.

Apart from Ethics, she had failed all her subjects. Eiri's rubbish grades was a close second after Mohican's. Homeroom teacher Kurumiya kept scolding her with a pile of insults including "idiot", "retard", "mentally handicapped", "a disgrace to Year 1 Class A", "flat chest", "tits and brains both at grade school level", "Boobs at Triple A, Grades at F", "go die!" etc but Eiri kept her smile all along. It felt so uncomfortable that even

Kurumiya could not swear anymore, remaining silent until the morning period ended.

But of course, Kurumiya was not going to let things end with that...

'--Akabane Eiri, you get your ass over here now!'

When Period 5 ended, Kurumiya grabbed Eiri by the back of her neck and dragged her forcibly to the staff room.

Even after an hour passed since Eiri was abducted, they did not return.

Kyousuke was extremely worried what might happen to Eiri after she was taken away. The sight of him pacing in circles inside the classroom made Renko sigh "shuko--"

"Don't worry. Calm down, Kyousuke."

"She's right. You have to calm down, Onii-chan."

The two girls spoke the same message at the same time. They had apparently been discussing something together with great interest for the past while. Turning her chair around to face Renko behind her, Ayaka had been writing nonstop in her notebook.

"Shopping, karaoke, amusement park, aquarium, zoo, video arcade, maid cafe, barbecue, movies, museums, summer festivals, swimming at a beach, visit doujinshi sales, gas mask conventions... Is there anywhere else you want to go, Renko-san?"

"Lemme think, hmm~ ...Ah, I really want to attend a summer music festival! SUMPANI![2] I heard that the mysterious band 'AND MORE' who always cancels at the last minute will finally make a real appearance this year."

"Eh, really!? But tickets are already sold out, right?"

"Don't worry, Ayaka-chan. I've got connections."

"Connections!? No way, you're..."

"Foosh--That's right. I don't intend to hide it anymore. Actually, I'm GMK48's--"

"You're a scalper!?"

"Of course not!"

"...You two, what the heck have you been chattering nonstop about?"

"We're planning our itinerary for the summer vacation, Onii-chan."

"We're chatting about dating plans."

"Dating!?"

Someone's voice sounded very emotional.

Maina followed and yelled "ehhhhhhhhhhh!?", almost falling from her chair.

"Yes. Ayaka and Renko-san *will have permission for parole* because our finals were top three in the year group, right? So, since it's a rare chance, plans need to discussed first about what's next--"

"In other words, we need to decide where to go have fun. We can fit in so much stuff for a week's holidays. We can go wherever we want!"

"Yeah! Although it's quite a shame that Onii-chan can't go... But a date with Renko-san feels like a nice idea too. Ehehe. Summer vacation can't come any faster~"

"Right, I totally can't wait~ Hurry, hurry and arrive, summer vacation!"

"Hey, hold your horses."

The two girls were gathered around a desk when they heard a slam! A palm had landed on it.

"I don't recall agreeing to that kind of plan, you know?"

" "Eh?" "

Ayaka and Renko looked at Kyousuke one after another.

"Why is your permission needed?"

"So true. It's the school that has authority to give permission, right? Not you."

"Eh?"

Counterattacked unexpectedly, Kyousuke felt his entire vigor cut down by half.

At this moment, someone stabbed and twisted the blade.

"Onii-chan hopes that Ayaka can learn independence from you, right? In that case, Onii-chan needs to learn to separate from Ayaka and be independent first!"

"I know you're a siscon but aren't you interfering too much? Doing this kind of thing will only make Ayaka-chan's world more and more narrow, you know?"

"No wait, what I mean is--"

"Could it be that you don't trust Renko-san as a person, Onii-chan? Are you worried about Ayaka spending time alone with her? You couldn't possibly still be thinking of saying something like that, could you?"

"Foosh--Don't say that, Ayaka-chan... Kyousuke hopes you can 'get along peacefully with everyone' so he won't say something so selfish, right?"

"Ugh--"

Struck in a sore spot, Kyousuke's gaze began to drift.

Then he forced himself to utter the following:

"B-But... There's that. Eiri is in big trouble right now, where's your love for your classmate if you two go have fun on your own? You're not worried about her at all?"

"We will worry, but how would worrying help? Failing in exams is Eiri-san's own responsibility."

"Yeah. Serves her right! It's true that she failed her exams but I don't think she'll die for it. You and Maina are worrying too much. With Eiri facing so much hardship, we have to enjoy ourselves to cover her share--So that's that. Where should we go?"

"...None of you are listening at all."

Whether Renko or Ayaka, both of them seemed totally obsessed with going out on dates for parole.

As much as Kyousuke trusted Renko, she was also a tried and tested mass murderer. He was quite unwilling to let his flesh-and-blood younger sister spend a week alone under that kind of person's gaze.

Forced to worry about other stuff apart from Eiri, Kyousuke felt totally exhausted.

With a custodial supervisor following them during parole, nothing major was going to happen, right...?

"Ah!?"

Maina suddenly stood up from her chair.

The door at the front of the classroom opened and a student entered.

"Eiri, are you okay!?"

"Eiri-chaaaaaaaaaan! Did you get hurt--zukoooooooooooo!?"

"Kyah!?"

While running over, Maina slipped and fell. Eiri hastily evaded the tackle.

A very loud crash was heard in the corridor.

"Y-Yeah... I'm fine. Rather, are you okay, Maina?"

"Ha-owwww~ S-Shorry..."

Eiri looked in shock at Maina who was holding her bumped head.

She looked like she was back to normal. None of that unnatural cheerfulness from earlier. There were also no signs of Kurumiya's disciplining on her body. All parts were perfectly attached to their proper places.

Kyousuke ran out after Maina and started to confirm Eiri's safety.

"Hey Eiri, did that bitch Kurumiya, umm... Did she do anything to you?"

"Nothing much. But--"

Eiri's gaze shifted away from Kyousuke's group...

"I'm excused from both make up exams and supplementary lessons."

" " " "...Eh?" " " "

Eiri spoke lightly while the others all made noises of confusion. Renko and Ayaka stopped their discussion and looked at Eiri one after another.

Eiri looked inexplicably annoyed. Kyousuke asked her:

"Excused from both... For real?"

"Yeah. I don't need to take the supplementary lessons and make up exams during summer break now, but she assigned a ton of homework for me to do instead."

"Oh, isn't that great? The worst outcome is avoided!"

"Hawa~ I-I'm so relieved... Congratulations, Eiri-chan!"

"Mm-hmm. This is good news, no doubt about it, but how unusual. To think Kurumiya-san would offer leniency so readily."

"Maybe she took pity because the results were so tragic? Or did you sell out your body?"

"...Huh? How could I possibly sell out my body?"

Eiri glanced with partially lowered eyelids.

First she looked at Kyousuke's group then she tossed her hair and said:

"Actually, I was summoned to go back to my old home."

--Eiri threw these words out with disdain.

Kyousuke, Maina and Renko, the three of them all went "EH!?" at the same time.

"Old home... You mean *that* old home? Didn't they cut ties to you already?"

"I thought so too. From what Kurumiya said, it seems like they've been keeping tabs on my situation... What rotten luck. I'd rather choose supplementary lessons."

"Hawawa. It should be something important if they asked you to go back, right?"

"Hmm. I heard they 'wanted to see my face.' Who knows...? Anyway, it's very suspicious for sure. I can't believe they went as far as to pressure the school to force me to go back."

"...Eiri-san's home sounds very dangerous? Are they yakuza or something?"

Out of everyone in the group, Ayaka was the one who knew least about Eiri's background. She cocked her head in puzzlement.

Smiling wryly, Eiri went "no" and explained:

"Every generation of my family has *made assassination their trade*. Yakuza would have been slightly better. All my relatives are *assassins*, everyone has killed before."

"Eh!? Say that again? It sounds so scary..."

Ayaka was frightened after learning the secret, backing away completely.

Renko went "foosh--" and laughed.

"Don't worry, Ayaka-chan. Eiri *can't kill people*. Like you and Kyousuke, her kill count is a big fat zero. Although on paper, the claim is six kills, that's all."

"Ehhhhh!? S-So that's the case..."

Ayaka examined Eiri carefully. Muttering "just like Ayaka" to herself, then pouting, she grumbled "...that sure ruined the matching pair."

On the other hand, Eiri shrugged.

"...Anyway, that's that. While I'm visiting home during summer break, I won't be able to take supplementary lessons. Oh right, one more thing--"

In the next second, Eiri's tone of voice changed.

Sharp as a blade, her rust-red eyes shot straight at Kyousuke.

--Then she spoke:

"Apart from me, they also wanted someone else to go together... That's you, Kyousuke."

Scene 1 - Cage Smeared With Blood / "Blood Stain Cage"

August 12 (Monday) Rainy

Today, I got up early to see everyone off.

It's so scary and lonely to be alone.

But I will smile bravely...

I'll be on my own for a while starting today.

Not only that, all I can see are scary people around.

I dunno what scary things will happen to me.

So afraid.

So I locked myself in my room the whole day, doing homework.

Going out is scary. I don't dare visit the cafeteria or the snack shop.

I drink foul-tasting water when I'm hungry.

Filling my stomach like this.

If only my exam results were top three...

My tears fall whenever my thoughts reach this point.

How is everyone now?

I hope they will enjoy themselves, including my share too.

Blood Stain Cage
血塗られた籠
第一幕

8月12日（月）

今日は朝早くに起きて、みんなのお見送りをしました。
本当は心細くてさびしかったけど、
笑顔をくずさないように……。
今日からしばらくひとりぼっちです。
しかも、まわりは全員コワい人たち。
どんなヒドい目にあわされるんだろうと、
気が気じゃありません。
1日中お部屋にこもって、宿題をしてすごしました。
外に出るのがコワいので食堂にも購買にもいけません。
お腹がすいたらクサいお水をのんで、
空腹をまぎらわせます。
わたしもテストで3位以内に入っていれば……
と思うと、ナミダが止まりませんでした。
みんなは今ごろどうしているのかな？
わたしのぶんも笑っていてほしいです。

The summer break at the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation lasted a week from August 12 to 19.

Since August 10 and 11 was a weekend, it was effectively a nine-day vacation.

Kyousuke and the others had lessons until Friday. Then after spending time on campus for Saturday and Sunday, they left the school early on Monday morning. After taking a prisoner transport vehicle to the island's edge, they then took a very long boat ride.

The rocking ride on a small ferry took over half a day. Arriving at Japanese soil after one night, they then took a prisoner transport vehicle again. In the vehicle right now--

"......Sigh."

Eiri sighed. This had happened too many times to count, Kyousuke felt that it was approaching three digits.

Especially after leaving the school, Eiri looked utterly depressed.

"Say, are you that unwilling to go home?"

"I don't want to go home. It's dead obvious... Go die."

She leaned against the backrest limply.

"...This is the worst. In every way."

"Every way?"

"Yeah. Just going home is annoying enough, but there's useless stuff coming along too."

"Calling us u-useless is a bit..."

"So mean, we came along only because we're worried about you, Eiri! Shuko!"

"That's right, too mean! We cancelled our plans to come here, you know!? You should be thanking us. Tsundere much?"

The people protesting against Eiri were Renko and Ayaka who were originally super excited and overjoyed about their planned date. Facing Kyousuke and Eiri, they were sitting on the opposite row of seats.

Eiri sighed and pressed her palm on her forehead.

"After moaning a whole bunch, the two of you insisted on coming along simply because you can't stand the thought of Kyousuke traveling alone with me. What you're thinking is obvious enough, you two."

"Ah... No way, is it written on my face?"

"Sheesh, you've got to pull yourself together, Renko-san. Aren't you showing your true colors now?"

"No, you can't tell at all with the gas mask."

--Come on, you've got to step up with the straight man's retorts, little sister.

Ever since the incident last time, it felt like Ayaka had gotten attached to Renko to an outrageous degree.

The home of assassins--Even though we were clearly going to such an extremely abnormal place, Ayaka and Renko were in high spirits, in a state of excitement the whole time along the way.

Using their parole, the chance for a vacation outside of school, they had insisted on coming uninvited to Eiri's home. Not wanting Ayaka to come to any harm, Kyousuke had objected strongly but...

'Are you leaving Ayaka behind, Onii-chan?'

A tearful plea like this forced him to give in reluctantly.

Apart from that--

"Students, we'll be there in two or three hours, okay? We'll make a stop at a convenience store before that, so just tell me what you want me to buy. It's lunch time."

Sitting outside the cage in the driver's seat, a man spoke to them. He was the homeroom teacher of Year 1 Class B at the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation, serving as the custodial supervisor for Kyousuke's party. Accompanied by the "Poison User," a super elite killer like Kurumiya, there should be nothing to worry about.

After hearing Busujima, Ayaka said with sparkling eyes: "Convenience store!"

"We're finally liberated from eating leftovers every day!?"

Yesterday's lunch, dinner and even today's breakfast were all "leftover bentos" (expired). Kyousuke and his friends did not get to eat anything decent normally. Even convenience store bentos would seem like gourmet delicacies to them.

Instantly full of energy and excitement in the vehicle, everyone put forth their orders.

"I want a salted ribs bento!"

"Ayaka wants the most expensive bento!"

"I want something that'll charge me up in ten seconds and last for two hours!"[3]

"...Isn't that the usual?"

"Hmm? Oh right. Then I'll have melon bread!"

"It won't fit through the straw."

"Shuko..."

"Kamiya-kun wants a rib bento, Kamiya-san wants the most expensive bento, Hikawa-san wants a jelly drink, is that correct? Got it. What would you like, Akabane-san?"

"Whatever. I'm fine with anything."

"I see. Okay, then I'll pick according to my tastes."

"B-Busujima-sensei's tastes..."

Ayaka stared at Busujima with a subtle look on her face.

Busujima was dressed in casual clothing instead of his usual old and worn suit--A Hawaiian shirt whose colors looked quite poisonous. He was also wearing sunglasses with a straw hat on his head.

Noticing Ayaka's stares, Busujima asked her in puzzlement.

"Is there anything suspicious about my tastes? Oh... Are you telling me that the clothes I picked don't look good on you?"

"...Hmm."

Ayaka did not know how to answer. She was wearing a floral print one-piece dress with a theme of light purple. She also had a transparent looking white cardigan and camel-colored gladiator sandals.

"Honestly speaking, it's not that it doesn't look good, but--"

"It's creepy exactly because it looks good."

Ayaka stuttered and Eiri finished the sentence for her.

"...Also, what the heck is this? A new kind of sexual harassment?"

Eiri picked up the hem of her clothing and scowled. Like Ayaka, she was dressed in casual clothing: an off-shoulder t-shirt with a pair of super short hot pants.

Busujma went "oh--" and touched his stubble.

"No, you got the wrong idea. That's not what I meant. Akabane-san, you have a lovely pair of legs, right? I just wanted to pick clothes that made the most of that advantage. But if you show a lot of skin below, you need the top to be a bit revealing for overall balance! As for Kamiya-san, because your name has the character 'ka' which means flower, that's why I chose that kind of pattern--"

" "What a creep." "

Eiri and Ayaka were in complete agreement.

"You're calling me a creep!?"

In addition to the devastating blow, Busujima received vicious glares from the two girls...

"Why are you putting so much thought into it, so creepy... You're just a geeky middle-aged man. What do you want? You think you're an image consultant? Your usual suit sucks too. Nasty!"

"Secretly imagining what clothes would look good on us while staring at fashion guides, it's totally disgusting. So creepy... It's even more disgusting that both Ayaka and Eiri-san's clothing fits perfectly. How much thought did you put into it, you creep!

"Ehhhhh..."

Called a creep over and over again, Busujima was about to cry.

This reaction further increased his creepiness factor several fold.

"You don't have to use such awful descriptions, do you? I spent a whole day thinking about it, this is so mean... Basically, as long as it looks good, right? Girls should dress up to look cute and pretty! Kamiya-kun, don't you agree?"

"Huh? Oh, uh..."

Suddenly asked, Kyousuke found it difficult to answer immediately. He was dressed in a simple polo shirt with jeans.

His plain attire contrasted sharply with the girls'. Busujima had said "boys need only dress like this" and gave him some random clothing. Kyousuke understood very well, but--

"Yeah. Personally, I think it's great, Busujima-sensei!"

"...Kyousuke?"

"...Onii-chan?"

Looking back at Eiri and Ayaka's stares of disdain, Kyousuke said:

"Think about it carefully. Your getups are really great, aren't they? Eiri looks extremely pretty and Ayaka is very cute. The clothes are an excellent match. It's a lovely sight."

As soon as he finished, the two girls went red.

"What... What stupid crap are you talking about? Pretty? Stop leering, you big pervert! You're a creep too! What nonsense are you spouting!?"

Eiri tried to cover up her exposed skin in a panic. Meanwhile--

"Ehehe. Thanks for the praise, Onii-chan! Ayaka feels much better now that Onii-chan praised Ayaka!"

Smiling radiantly, Ayaka was immersed in happiness.

"...I can't believe how differently you two treat me. Although I'm used to it."

Busujima gloomily focused on driving.

At this moment, originally watching silently, Renko stood up at once and went "my turn my turn my turn--Me!"

"Hey hey! How do I look, Kyousuke?"

"Huh? Oh--"

Prompted by her question, Kyousuke looked at Renko.

Unlike the rest of them, Renko was dressed in her own casual clothing rather than Busujima's selections.

She was wearing a tank top, but her arms were densely covered in tribal tattoos. There was a leather belt choker on her neck. Combined with her excessively massive bust, the sight was very impactful.

On the bottom, Renko was wearing deliberately ripped jeans. A parka was tied around her waist.

"Hmm. Not bad, it looks pretty good, I think?"

"That's all?"

"Yeah."

"........."

Renko stopped making model poses.

She sat down silently and tugged the edge of Ayaka's clothing.

"Hey, Kyousuke is acting so cold."

"Y-Yeah. What's with you, Onii-chan?"

Feeling gazes shooting at his face that was turned away, Kyousuke still chose to ignore them

Inside his heart, certain feelings were flowing.

(Arghh, damn it... Crap, I can't stay composed. How did this happen...?)

He bit his lip and thought back.

A few days ago, a certain incident had taken place at the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation.

Feeling particularly jealous of Renko, Eiri and Maina, Ayaka even went to steal from the staff room, taking a shotgun, intending to kill them--That was the original plan.

At the time, Renko was precisely the one who had reined in Ayaka.

After that, Ayaka loved Renko and tried to help her advance her relationship with Kyousuke.

--Everything up to this point was fine. A happy ending, but...

(Why do I feel so flustered... whenever I look at her?)

Ever since that incident, Kyousuke felt *a certain* change in the way he viewed Renko.

Although he did not know specifically what kind of emotion it was, he just could not calm down.

Words, actions, appearance--He felt more and conscious of Renko's every detail. He was starting to go out of his mind. This felt extremely unpleasant. But despite feeling unpleasant, he felt happy as well.

These contradictory feelings were fighting inside him...

(I'm gonna get killed as soon as our feelings become mutual. You've got to get a grip, Kamiya Kyousuke!)

In fact, he could already feel it faintly. He was starting to fall for that "Murder Made"--Hikawa Renko.

Trying his hardest to reject those feelings, Kyousuke slapped his own cheeks.

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"We've arrived, everyone. Let's get off."

After a stop along the way at a convenience store, they traveled for two more hours. Then with a heavy clang of unlocking, the prisoner transport vehicle's back door opened.

We were greeted by a tide of blinding sunlight and the sound of cicadas and rustling leaves.

"Wow? This is the outside world!"

"The air of freedom smells so refreshing!"

As soon as the door opened, Ayaka and Renko rushed outside. Kyousuke followed them and exited the vehicle. A cool and gentle breeze blew, cooling off their scorching skin.

Looking up at the sunny summer sky while stretching, Kyousuke saw bamboo leaves glittering under the sun.

"Where is this...?"

Since the prisoner transport vehicle's windows were tinted and barred, there was no way to tell what route they had taken and it was impossible to know where they were.

"...There's a mountain?"

He first looked all around him.

--*A certain* something immediately entered his view.

"What is this?"

"Looks very like a shrine's gate..."

"Feels... Huge."

Next to Renko and Ayaka who were standing side by side in awe, Kyousuke also looked up at "that thing."

Amidst a verdant bamboo forest, there was a towering gate with a tiled roof, looking quite out of place.

The pair of doors was made of wood and reached ten meters in size. The metal parts had detailed ornaments with traces of corrosion and moss as well as old stains, giving an impression of an ancient history.

All these things were red.

The tiles on the roof, the exquisite metalwork, the door, deteriorated from the passage of time, everything was colored red. It almost looked like it had been covered with blood...

"...Hmph, the entrance remains vulgar in taste as always."

The group was already speechless. Eiri ridiculed in disdain from behind.

Kyousuke asked with disbelief:

"Hey Eiri. Don't tell me... this is your home?"

"...Unfortunately, yes, although there's no doorplate, that's all. Look, that's the family crest there."

Eiri raised her hand and pointed somewhere. On each of the left and right doors was a circular decoration. A pattern of a bird's folded wing with every feather polished smooth, as sharp as blades.

Renko and Ayaka yelled in excitement after hearing Eiri's indifferent explanation.

"Amazing, so awesome! You're actually a daughter from a rich family, Eiri!?"

"Who knows what the inside is like, but all this land!? This has gone past the level of a home!"

"...Nothing much. You're exaggerating."

"Foosh--Your fake modesty is coming again?"

"Again? If you want modesty, just save it for your chest."

"Ahhh, enough, shut the hell up!"

Eiri found them a nuisance whereas Renko and Ayaka were in a state of excitement. At this moment, Busujima walked towards the girls.

Taking off his pair of sunglasses, he hung it before his chest.

"Wow, this gate is so grand... How do we enter?"

He turned his head and surveyed the surroundings.

The doors were shut tightly and the towering stone walls stretching left and right seemed endless, reaching deep into the bamboo forest. No intercom or anything like that could be seen either.

"Akabane-san, do you know how to enter?"

Hearing the question, Eiri clicked her tongue and said:

"The door will open on its own if you wait. After all, we've been discovered long ago... There's no need to make a loud fuss to enter. Just shut up and it'll open."

After saying that, Eiri gave Busujima a look of disdain.

Busujima timidly went "eh."

"Why are you acting so mean!? By the way, I think you should be using polite speech for teachers, even though it's a bit late to bring up. You clearly use polite speech when talking to Kurumiya-sensei, so what's with this difference in treatment? Bullying? I may be generous, but I'm not a masochist. If you get too full of yourself, watch out for my discipline--"

CREEEEEEAAAAAAAA...

Just as Busujima gave a murderous gaze, something happened. The doors creaked and started opening towards the inside.

Everyone froze, staring intently at the gradually opening doors.

First to enter their view was a stone paved path. A a gently sloping path led to an extra long flight of steps that could not possibly appear in a home garden. A vast expanse of flourishing greenery within the premises on the fair side of the steps.

Apart from that...

There was a long red wall of people.

" " " "......!?" " " "

Let alone Kyousuke and the others, even Eiri gasped.

Standing on that stone path on the two sides of the steps, dozens of men and women, old and young, were dressed in crimson kimonos, in a formation to greet incoming guests. All of them had their heads bowed and lips pursed.

--Totally silent.

Kyousuke's group was shocked motionless. Before their eyes...

"Welcome."

Suddenly, from shadows behind the doors, a white Noh mask appeared.

"Kyah!?" "Hyah!?" "Uwahhhhh!?"

Ayaka, Renko jumped away in fright. Kyousuke jumped too.

Taking a closer look, it was a woman wearing a Noh mask covering her face, standing at the entrance to the garden. She was wearing brown-red work clothes, known as the *samue*, whose color resembled dried blood.

"Welcome to the Akabane residence."

With a fleeting voice without any fluctuation of emotion, the woman welcomed Kyousuke and company.

Before Kyousuke and the others could react, Eiri answered "...tsk" on their behalf.

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Eiri passed through the entrance and said:

"...Just cut the annoying welcome show. Hurry and take us home."

Eiri spoke with displeasure.

The woman placed her hands before her and bowed respectfully.

"Affirmative. Welcome home, Eiri-sama."

"Yeah yeah, I'm home."

Eiri replied impatiently to the woman's greeting and looked back. Kyousuke could see unprecedented displeasure in her eyes--

"You lot, what are you spacing out there for?"

"...Oh, okay."

Hurried, Kyousuke and the others timidly entered the Akabane resident's gate.

"Thanks for having us..."

"E-Excuse me..."

"Thaaaaaaaanks!"

"Hikawa-san. Please don't offend them."

"...Hmph."

Eiri scoffed and looked forward. The woman moved over to the front of the steps and extended her hand as though guiding Kyousuke's group.

"Please head this way."

None of the people standing in formation on the two sides of the steps looked up ever since Kyousuke's group showed up. Neither did they speak. They even showed no signs of moving.

This remained the same even after the woman went up the steps with Kyousuke's group following.

With an endless line of red kimonos on the sides of the steps, Kyousuke ascended in trepidation.

"Hey Onii-chan, are these people alive? Maybe they're dolls?"

"Don't ask, or else they'll hear you! Don't say such rude stuff--"

"Lemme see... Oh? I think they're definitely alive! Feels soft and warm too. This chick's got huge boobs! Here, Kyousuke, try these. Groping time..."

"What the fuck are you doing, moron!? Hands off, now!"

"Fufu. By the way, they're really not reacting at all! See? So fun! It's a rare chance. Ayaka, just pick anyone and give 'em a gut punch for stress relief--"

"STOP! You two, are you trying to get killed!?"

"...Just get killed already."

A certain person's remark was really not funny at all.

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While stopping Ayaka and Renko from misbehaving, the group finally reached the top. A single-story and stately Japanese-style building greeted their arrival. Like the door earlier, everything was red from the tiles to the walls. Behind the especially massive main residence, the roofs of several other secondary buildings could be glimpsed.

There was a pond in the vast garden. Red carp was swimming back and forth. The flowers blooming all over the place were red too. Although everything was red, there were variations in hue and shade. Together with the natural greenery serving as a background, there was an incredible sense of contrast.

"Please enter."

Invited by the woman in the Noh mask, the group entered the house.

Walking along a veranda passage, they were soon taken to a vast Japanese-style room.

It was fifteen tatami mats in size. In the far end of the Japanese-style room was a alcove where scrolls and a Japanese sword were hanging. The smell of tatami and incense mixed together, filling the room with a fragrance difficult to describe.

"Please wait a moment in this room."

The woman knelt on the floor and prostrated before leaving the Japanese-style room. Sitting on a row on red seat cushions, Kyousuke and company admired the elegance of this reception hall. In front of them were red cushions, all of the same style.

"A-Amazing... It's a scene from a historical drama. It doesn't feel real at all."

"That sword there is real, right? Ayaka really wanna touch it!"

"I don't think you should do that, Ayaka-chan. What if it's a cursed blade?"

"That sword might have actually killed people before. It looks really important."

"......"

After the woman left, the group began to chatter aimlessly, whispering to one another. Eiri remained silent the whole time without saying a word.

The courtyard could be seen by looking out of the room. The crisp knocking sound of a shishi-odoshi's rotating bamboo tube could be heard there.

At this moment--

"Welcome to our residence, honored guests."

An elegant voice was heard.

After the previous woman left, someone else appeared. A young woman.

"......?"

Instantly, Eiri's body tensed up.

Kyousuke and company stopped chatting and all gazed at the woman.

Most striking of all was her pure white hair. Secured with a hairpin, the white hair looked very out of place in contrast to the young woman's appearance, giving off an impression of terminal illness.

Then there was her clothing. With a long red haori on top, she was wearing funeral garb as white as her hair—a thin unlined kimono like those worn by the dead.

The woman entered the room slowly. After sitting down on a seat cushion, she spoke:

"Greetings for the first time. I am Akabane Fuyou, the 29th head of the Akabane family's main branch. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

After saying that, she bowed. As though a result of makeup, her blood-red eyes gazed at Kyousuke's group.

Busujima timidly bowed back.

"Hello, nice to meet you! I am Busujima Kirito, a teacher from the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation. The original plan was to send the homeroom teacher herself instead of me..."

"I have heard already. Reportedly, there is an untamed bronco at school that Kurumiya-sama must subdue no matter what."

"...Indeed. He's quite a handful. You're right."

The bronco probably referred to Mohican. In the beginning, Kurumiya was happily going "Now I won't have to teach supplementary lessons to those fools!" but never expected Mohican to go on a massive rampage after learning she was going on a trip.

Mohican was certainly a force to be reckoned with, but as a fortunate consequence, the custodial supervisor was switched to Busujima. After the change in assignment, it was Kurumiya's turn to go on a rampage, resulting in heavy casualties.

Specifically, the old school building was now half wrecked with thirty injured among the first year students.

"Fufu. I am deeply grateful that all of you could take time from your busy schedules to make this long journey. Please accept my thanks on behalf of the Akabane family. Next..."

Fuyou turned her gaze to Eiri. In a gentle and elegant voice, she said:

"Welcome home, Eiri. I am overjoyed to see you again after so long."

"--"

Eiri kept her lips pursed tightly, staring at the courtyard for a while...

"...What is the meaning of this? Why arrange such a big show?"

She asked quietly.

Fuyou replied with all smiles after hearing Eiri's question.

"So that is what is on your mind. Since you have been away for half a year, I wanted everyone to go greet you. I called everyone from the branch families for the welcoming."

"...Please don't do something so unnecessary, Okaa-sama."

" " "Okaa-samaaaaaa!?" " "

Kyousuke and company instantly yelled out loudly in surprise.

Replying "indeed," Fuyou nodded and continued.

"Thank you for looking after my daughter on a daily basis. I am delighted to be able to meet all of you. Hikawa Renko-san, Kamiya Ayaka-san... Kamiya Kyousuke-san."

Fuyou turned her gaze to Kyousuke and the girls in order.

Hearing her own name called out before self-introductions, Renko went "shuko!?" and leaned back.

"How did you know our names... Was it mind reading!?"

"No, I simply asked in advance, Hikawa-san. As for your identity, do know that I am privy to various hearsay."

"...Oh, okay."

Skipping over Renko's stupid joke completely, Fuyou then looked at Ayaka.

"I've heard that you are a sister who admires her elder brother very much. I really hope my children could learn from you. Harmonious relations between siblings is truly something to rejoice."

"Ehehe. That's so true, right? Ayaka and Onii-chan are the most mutually loving siblings in the entire world!"

Responding to Ayaka's grinning answer with a smile, Fuyou shifted her gaze to Kyousuke next.

The Akabane family head—Eiri's mother—met his gaze, causing Kyousuke to feel nervous.

Her vivid blood-red eyes narrowed instantly.

"Next, this is Kyousuke-san, isn't it? Fufufu. I see, I see now--"

"...Okaa-sama, why did you ask for Kyousuke?"

With her chin resting on one hand, Fuyou examined him closely. Eiri inquired in a serious tone of voice one would not usually use with one's birth mother.

"What exactly are your intentions in inviting an outsider like Kyousuke?"

"What are you asking, Eiri...? Isn't the answer obvious?"

The smile did not leave Fuyou's gorgeous red lips.

Glancing at Kyousuke out of the corner of her eye, she said:

"My beloved daughter has found a male companion--How could any mother not worry upon hearing such news? Besides, you are the Akabane main family's eldest daughter. Appraising your future husband is of monumental importance in the clan."

"......Hmm."

Fuyou's words did not permit objections. Eiri could not help but find herself at a loss for words.

"L-Like anyone's going to choose that guy for a husband--" "By the way, didn't you cut me off from the family already?" "Butting in my affairs now after so long..." After a whole lot of grumbling...

"Despite making up such a legitimate reason, you actually want to *eliminate* Kyousuke, right?"

Her question was filled with distrust.

The daughter stared at her mother, her eyes filled with intense suspicion.

On the other hand, Fuyou took on her daughter's gaze and spoke with a wry smile: "You..."

"Guests are not invited to be eliminated. They ought to be well entertained. Please refrain from saying such trouble stirring things. It saddens your mother to hear such words."

"......"

Seeing her mother raise her sleeve to the corner of her eye in "sadness," Eiri's demeanor looked even worse.

Fuyou did not seem to be lying, but her words did not sound sincere either.

In any case, she was an unfathomable person, concluded Kyousuke in his mind.

The shishi-odoshi's bottom end struck a rock, producing a crisp and refreshing knock.

"Back to entertaining our guests. Since the weather is so hot, I presume all of you are thirsty? Please serve some refreshing barley tea--Kagura?"

"--Yes, Fuyou-sama."

Someone responded to Fuyou's orders.

A girl appeared in front of the group from behind the ajar sliding door.

"Excuse me."

Matching the impression of her voice, she was a young beauty exuding a sense of transparency.

Dressed in scarlet Japanese attire, she had her rust-red hair tied up by the side of her neck. Her slender rust-red eyes, the same color as her hair, were shining with sharpness that did not match her child-like face.

Her stern demeanor was very similar to a certain someone who could not be more familiar to Kyousuke and the girls.

"...Ah."

After half a beat's delay, Eiri emitted a sound.

The girl--Kagura--carried a tray of red lacquer and set it on the tatami floor, then bowed to the group. Next, she served the guests iced barley tea in glasses.

"Please enjoy." "Thank you very much."

"Please enjoy." "Oh, thanks..."

"Please enjoy." "Thank you?"

"Please enjoy." "Wow, thanks!"

She served the tea to Busujima, Kyousuke, Ayaka and Renko in order before a certain someone last.

"...Please enjoy."

"Yeah, thanks--"

Kagura extended the glass in front of Eiri.

Just as Eiri was about to hold the glass--

"*Die*."

With lightning speed, Kagura swung her arm, aiming straight for Eiri's throat.

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--Clang. An extraordinary sharp noise.

Eiri's glass was sliced into two from the side, spilling barley tea from the cut.

"...Ku!?"

Eiri swiftly retreated backwards, evading Kagura's lethal weapon. At the same time, her right foot flashed.

The five blades fitted on her toenails--the nail swords "Scarlet Slicing"--swung upwards, preventing Kagura from following up the attack. Leaving Eiri's hand, the glass flew through the air and was chopped vertically this time.

"Resistance is futile!"

Kagura yelled and stubbornly pursued.

Regaining balance, Eiri jumped away. Kagura attacked fiercely.

Kagura was holding some kind of concealed weapon, an opened metal fan. A large fan almost thirty centimeters in length, the silver-white of its frame shone with metallic luster.

Like Eiri's nails, the fan's edge was probably fitted with blades--

"Die."

--Slash!

Kagura swung the metal fan, slicing through the scroll behind Eiri. The hanging scroll was bifurcated, its lower half dropping on the alcove with a plop.

A moment earlier, Eiri's head was still in the fan's trajectory. Had she ducked any slower, she might have been decapitated.

"Tsk... You're pretty fired up to kill, Kagura!"

"Captain Obvious, aren't you?"

Kagura pulled her fan back and chopped downwards at the top of Eiri's head. Eiri grabbed the Japanese sword that was hanging under the decorative scroll and blocked the fan's frame with the scabbard.

Approaching with eyes screaming for murder, Kagura attacked even more forcefully.

"Seeing you so shameless, living as a disgrace, anyone would want to kill you. Who can stand that loser look? Could you please disappear faster?"

"...Hmph, I refuse. Just try if you want me to disappear. But you have to be able to kill me first, right?"

"Shut up, you're about to die!"

Kagura jumped to the side, kicked the floor, then raised her fan to chop diagonally from above. Using the scabbard to block the metal fan's attacks, Eiri dodged all over the place while Kagura pursued relentlessly.

The fan flew like a fluttering butterfly, tracing out graceful curves of light.

"Goddamnit! Seriously! Insolent! Aren't you!?"

"Ku--"

Kagura's consecutive attacks were extremely fluid. Meanwhile, Eiri manipulated the scabbard masterfully, blocking the consecutive attacks effortlessly. Sometimes, the blade would accidentally slide past Eiri, cutting up pillars, tatami and furniture. A large number of blade marks extended from the alcove to the walls of the room.

"......Huh?"

Kyousuke finally managed to make a sound.

Things had happened too suddenly, leaving him completely lost. No sooner had Kagura served the barley tea, the two girls started to fight in a fierce dance of blades.

The gap between the blade and her skin was only the thickness of a sheet of paper. Most likely in the process of evading a fast draw slash, Kagura was frozen awkwardly in an unfinished posture. Eiri taunted.

"A one-hit kill is part of the basics of assassination, isn't it? Deciding death in a single strike after drawing the sword... Failure to do so would be tantamount to failure. Looks like you still have ways to go, Kagura."

Saying that, Eiri smirked.

Kagura went "...guh" and gritted her teeth, glaring viciously at Eiri.

However, she immediately went "ha!" and raised her chin.

"Look who's talking! You... a one-hit kill? Deciding death in a single strike? Coming from the mouth of Rusty Nail who can't accomplish either of that, it's completely unconvincing. Since you can't kill people anyway, I could simply ignore the blade and send you to hell, how's that?"

A tense atmosphere hung while the two girls faced off.

The sound of the shishi-odoshi's lively knock was heard.

Fuyou sighed deeply.

"What are you two doing? ...Both Eiri and Kagura, please put your blades away."

" "----" "

They first looked at Fuyou then each other before putting down their weapons.

Eiri re-sheathed the sword while Kagura shut the fan. Achieving the same effect as "Scarlet Slicing" through alternate means, the concealed weapon fitted with a Japanese blade was inserted into her kimono's sash. Kagura clicked her tongue.

"...Just die already." With that malicious remark, Kagura left Eiri's side. Eiri shrugged without saying a word and returned the Japanese sword to the alcove before coming back to Kyousuke's location.

"U-Umm..."

Kyousuke did not know what to say. Eiri simply responded indifferently.

"Don't mind it. This kind of thing happens throughout the whole day."

Kyousuke went "huh?" with surprise written all over his face.

A glass rolled over next to the seat cushion. Together with the ice inside it, the glass had been sliced cleanly into half. Attacked by such a blade, even a glancing blow would be devastating.

...To think that such a fight happened "throughout the whole day"?

Kyousuke and company were already scared silly. Fuyou apologized to them: "I am terribly sorry."

"To think such unseemliness would be witnessed with guests present... I have already asked Kagura to control herself as much as possible. Her emotions were presumably over turbulent upon reuniting after so long. After all, Kagura is a girl at a hot-blooded age."

"......My utmost apologies."

Kagura came over and sat down formally in seiza behind Fuyou, bowing her head in apology. Then she looked up and opened those tightly closed eyelids, easing the tension in her sharp gaze somewhat.

"It might be bit late for introductions at this point, but her name is Akabane Kagura. The Akabane family's second daughter, Eiri's younger sister two years her junior."

"...Hello everyone."

After Fuyou introduced her, Kagura greeted in a quiet voice.

"Despite her belligerence, she will never kill for fun, so please rest assured."

Smiling Fuyou continued her explanation.

"The Akabane clan pledges loyalty to the family head and members only execute assassination missions after receiving the head's orders. Members of the main family are under the main family head's control while members of the branch families obey the heads of their respective family. In addition, branch family heads pledge allegiance to the main family head. Assassins of the Akabane are merely blades swung according to the main family head's will."

The current head of the Akabane main family, Fuyou, spoke.

Just as swords would not hurt their owner on their own, these assassins would not engage in indiscriminate slaughter. Only when the "swordsman" known as the family head swung did they harmed and killed people--

In other words, the main family head's power was absolute in the Akabane clan. A unique existence disobeyed by no one.

But in that case, Kagura trying to kill Eiri might then be under Fuyou's orders rather than her own volition. A mother who looked so benevolent on the surface, yet privately...

"Fufu. By the way, did you know you truly fought spectacularly, Eiri?

In front of the unsettled Kyousuke and others, Fuyou smiled delightfully.

"Originally expecting your skills to regress after being away from home for half a year, I was so worried the whole time... Looks like it was unfounded paranoia. Nothing less expected from the premier trenchant blade of the present generation, I suppose? If you were to succeed the Akabane family, I would be able to retire in seclusion without worry--"

"Fuyou-sama!"

Instantly, Kagura cried out emotionally.

"Nee-san is no trenchant blade! She is a rusted and blunt blade or a poor-quality imitation sword. A sword that can't kill is worthless. I will succeed the Akabane family... After killing useless Nee-san, I will be the successor!"

"...Hmm."

Kagura glared with eyes filled with hostility, but Eiri avoided eye contact. With her hand on top of her leg in seiza posture, she was gripping her knee tightly.

Fuyou went "oh my" and brought her hand to her cheek.

"How belligerent you are. Such resemblance... So aggressive. In that case, hurry to become the sword that surpasses your sister. Eiri too, if you wish to become a full-fledged assassin, you must kill someone for real."

"...Understood, Fuyou-sama."

"I-I know... Okaa-sama."

Kagura's expression was filled with resentful anger while Eiri showed a pained expression.

Seeing this pair of sisters with heads lowered, Fuyou sighed.

"They are on such poor terms, but honestly, they used to be so close."

"......"

After hearing Fuyou, Kagura's expression became distorted.

Her complicated expression looked quite displeased.

"......"

Seeing her younger sister show such a look, Eiri could only gaze at her in sorrow.

The dark atmosphere hanging in the reception hall was swept away by Fuyou's cheerful voice.

"--Listen here, let the tantrums between sisters end here. Please enjoy your barley tea, everyone. The ice is about to melt."

"S-Sure..."

"Umm? ...T-Thanks."

"Thanks for the drink..."

"There's no poison in it, right?"

Renko's thoughtless comment while taking out her straw caused Kyousuke and the rest who were about to drink obediently to freeze.

"Of course not," Fuyou said while covering the side of her mouth with her hand.

"All generations of our Akabane family have used blades as their weapons. We have never used vulgar means of murder such as the likes of poison."

Indirectly insulted, Busujima made a bitter face, but Fuyou did not seem to notice.

"Sorry for being vulgar..." After grumbling quietly, Busujima finished his glass of barley tea in one breath.

"...S-So delicious! I've never tasted barley tea better than this."

"It's just a teabag sold for 400 yen per pack of fifty, you know?"

"Eh!? Oh, I see..."

"Quiet, Kagura! Please do not broach such subjects in front of guests!"

"Fufu. Busujima-sensei, you're super lame!"

"Hmm, looks like there's no poison. Want half of mine, Eiri?"

"......No."

Despite the fierce fighting earlier, the mood was harmonious and cordial again.

Am I the only one left who's still frightened? Kyousuke wondered uneasily while sipping barley tea. Fuyou smiled at him.

"Please excuse our many embarrassments earlier, in any case... Welcome to the Akabane residence, dear guests from the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation. Your plan is to stay here for four days and three nights, isn't that so? Just as you can see, this place is out in the countryside, but I sincerely welcome your visit."

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"Please come this way."

Fuyou had summoned the woman in the Noh mask, apparently the Akabane family's lady-in-waiting. Led by her, Kyousuke and company moved through the vast residence. They had already took their leave from Kagura and Fuyou at the reception hall.

"--You must be exhausted after your long journey, right? Please relax and take a good rest. I will send someone to inform you once dinner is ready. Please do not hesitate to let us know if there is anything you need."

"......"

The mother, Fuyou, had maintained a smile throughout. Then there was the quiet and unsmiling younger sister, Kagura. Only a family where all members made murder their career, just as described beforehand, would produced such weird relatives.

Apart from Kagura, Eiri apparently had additional siblings.

An elder brother, two younger brothers and a younger sister. There were four more family members who could potentially attack on first sight...

All relatives had apparently gathered. The thought of that made Kyousuke's head hurt.

Eiri's mood seemed nowhere good either. Ever since leaving the reception hall, she stayed in a frown the whole time.

Such a heavy atmosphere. Amidst this gloomy mood--

"Uwah, this is great! I can't believe there's another courtyard here."

"How many has it been? The third one? How big is their home!?"

Renko and Ayaka's noisy and excited chattering broke the dead silence.

Walking behind the lady-in-waiting but in front of Kyousuke and the rest, the two girls kept looking around--

"This house is really huge. It's not every day that we get this kind of chance. Wanna go exploring later?"

"Count Ayaka in! Let's look for secret rooms!"

"Yeah! Sounds great, right? Isn't it like a ninja's lair?"

"So true so true! Like revolving doors and secret passages."

"Or hidden entrances and spiked traps? Seems like playing hide and seek will be super high!"

" "......" "

Renko and Ayaka were completely ignoring the lady-in-waiting on the side. Kyousuke and Eiri exchanged glances because of their behavior.

Eiri sighed and pressed her hand against her temple.

"Those two have no idea of nervous tension, right?"

"Seriously, it's like they're on an outing, those two."

Renko alone, was Ayaka not scared at all?

This was the home of famous assassins where anything could happen...

"Don't be so serious. Isn't this great?"

At this time, Kyousuke heard a voice from behind.

Walking leisurely at the back, Busujima adjusted his straw hat's brim.

"The people of the Akabane clan don't take action without the family head's orders, right? Just treat this as a vacation trip and enjoy yourselves. Being careful is a good thing, of course, but don't be too tense. There's nothing to worry about. I've been paying attention the whole time."

At the same time, a pink object slid out from Busujima's pants leg.

A snake with round eyes and a triangular head.

""...Oh." "

The poisonous snake's body was covered with geometric patterns. Crawling across the veranda, it moved towards the courtyard, entering a stone lantern after slithering over fine sand for a while, disappearing out of sight.

"I released some of my 'friends' in the area. They'll report to me if there's anything unusual. Venom Opera is secretly playing."

"Shhh..." Busujima raised an index finger and winked.

Despite that creepy appearance, he looked very reliable.

Keeping all kinds of poisonous creatures on his person, controlling them freely--With such a poison master present, keeping an eye on the entire house should be easy.

"Busujima-sensei... For the first time, you actually look a bit cool."

"...Yeah. Pretty good, looks like the only thing lame is your appearance."

"These compliments sound really backhanded... Fine, whatever. It's not every day you get a summer vacation. Enjoy yourselfs to the full, everyone."

Another one. Busujima released a bright yellow poisonous moth from his luggage with a smile.

"I guess you're right," said Kyousuke and relaxed his shoulders. However, Eiri's demeanor did not improve. Staring at a spider's web on the ceiling overhead, she said:

"...These furtive little tricks, Okaa-sama should have seen through all of it already--"

"The two rooms over here are the guest rooms prepared for you."

While Eiri was murmuring to herself, the lady-in-waiting walking in the lead stopped and pulled open a Japanese-style room's sliding door.

Renko and Ayaka rushed inside and yelled in excitement.

"Wow, so pretty! Don't you think this room's great? Foosh--"

"Seems like a luxury hotel!? There's also a TV, awesome!"

Slightly later, Kyousuke and the others caught up and examined the room.

The room was roughly the size of eight tatami mats, with a Japanese-style low table in the center. Very considerately, a teapot and teacups had been prepared with even tea leaves and snacks.

The ornamental alcove in the room was decorated with fresh flowers and a hanging scroll. The television was kept in a cupboard.

Past the opened sliding door, Renko and Ayaka were running randomly all around.

"Ahh, I guess the luggage can't be placed in the alcove..."

"Busujima-sensei! How are we gonna divide the rooms?"

Busujima was rearranging the randomly thrown luggage and muttering when Renko asked him the question.

Ayaka went "Ayaka got it figured out!" and raised her hand high.

"Ayaka will room with Onii-chan!"

"Me too, I want to room with Kyousuke!"

" "Rooming with Sensei, no thanks." "

"......"

Rejected by simultaneous voices, Busujima turned quite gloomy on the spot.

Taking off his straw hat, he answered:

"No, boys and girls have to be separate, right? Kamiya-kun will room with me."

"Eh, even Busujima-sensei wants to have a go at Kyousuke too!? N-No way..."

"Sensei, you can't do that! Onii-chan doesn't swing that way. Also, with a middle-aged guy like you... Ayaka will never approve of someone like you!"

"Did you two get heat stroke?"

"...They were hopeless to begin with."

"Excuse me for being forward, Hikawa Renko-sama."

While we were squabbling, the lady-in-waiting interjected.

"You have a separate rooming arrangement."

"...Huh?"

Renko was surprised, never expecting to be told something like that.

"By separate rooming arrangement, you mean?"

"You will be staying in the storeroom within the premises."

"...Storeroom?"

"Indeed. The storeroom."

"Storerooooooooom!?"

Renko was so surprised that she fell over backwards from what the lady-in-waiting said.

"Why am I the only one who has to stay in a storeroom!? No matter how I look, I'm still human, you know!?"

"Yes. I know that."

"If you know that, don't throw me in that kind of place, right!?"

"No. There is assuredly no mistake regarding your accommodations being the storeroom."

"Why!? You already admitted I'm not an object!"

"I am terribly sorry. I am simply following the family head's orders. That being said, I do know a little about your special identity. Perhaps that explains why you need to be isolated..."

"......Gununu."

Unable to muster a rebuttal, Renko fell completely silent. Once her limiter was removed, she would turn into a psycho killer whose every emotion turned into *killing* behavior. Someone like that must not be left roam unchecked. Neither could Kyousuke and the others be allowed to stay with her.

Whenever she removed her mask, total isolation would be more appropriate.

"Shuko--..."

"No hard feelings."

Eiri patted Renko on the shoulder.

Then she turned to the lady-in-waiting standing at the room's entrance--

"--By the way, what about me? Can I use my own room?"

"Please choose as you please, milady."

"...I see. Got it."

"Eiri's room?"

Originally depressed, Renko instantly lighted up with interest.

"I'm so curious what it looks like! Where is it? Where's your room!?"

"...Huh? Like it's that important."

"Ayaka wants to see too! Hurry and show us."

"No."

Eiri's response was very cold.

"Eh..."

"Why not...?"

"No why."

"Because it's very messy?"

"Because there's something mortifying in the room?"

"Neither. I just don't feel like it."

"Please please?"

"No."

"You can't show us the room?

"Absolutely not."

" "......" "

Renko and Ayaka exchanged glances then nodded.

In the next instant...

"Then we'll start exploriiiiiiiiiiiing!"

"Let's find Eiri-san's roooooooooooooom!"

"Hey you two...!?"

Renko and Ayaka rushed past Eiri and sprinted out of the room.

Renko ran right while Ayaka went left. The two girls were running in opposite directions in the corridor.

"So annoying, those two idiots--Kyousuke!"

Eiri was about to give chase immediately when she suddenly stopped and pointed to the left side of the corridor.

"I'm leaving your sister to you! I'll catch Renko!"

"Yeah, got it!"

After assigning roles, Eiri ran off. After her, Kyousuke left the room.

With the chaotic noise of four people's footsteps, they instantly ran far away.

" "......" "

Only the lady-in-waiting and Busujima were left at the scene.

A moment later, the lady-in-waiting bowed and departed at a leisurely pace.

Thus, Busujima remained alone--

"...Sigh. Let's have some tea."

Taking the teapot and the tea leaves, he began to brew tea.

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"Hey wait up! Stop for a moment, Ayaka!"

"Oh, it's you, Onii-chan."

In this corridor that stretched on straight, Ayaka stopped running and looked back.

Turning to the panting Kyousuke chasing after her, she said:

"What's the matter?"

"What nerve you have to ask what's the matter..."

Ayaka tilted her head. Kyousuke was appalled at her response.

Giving her a light chop to the head, he began to scold her.

"You're out of control, idiot. Don't suddenly run off, okay...?"

"Ahaha, sorry sorry. Because Eiri-san's home is too spectacular, Ayaka got too excited."

Holding her head after being hit, Ayaka stuck her little tongue out and looked around.

Relative to the guest room they had run from, the current veranda should not be too far off. On the left was a curtain for blocking the sun. On the right was a line of paper doors to Japanese-style rooms.

"It's not like I don't understand how you feel.. But this is someone else's home after all. Don't be too noisy. Or else you're being a nuisance, right?"

"...Sorry."

Ayaka hung her head glumly.

The twintails, tied with purple checkered ribbons, dangled listlessly.

Kyousuke went "ah...", scratched his head and said:

"Also, I'm very worried as your brother. It'd better if this was an ordinary family but every resident in this house is an assassin. This family is totally abnormal. They're even more deadly than murder convicts, you know? Even with Busujima-sensei on watch, who knows what might happen if you go exploring recklessly--"

"Sorry for having an abnormal family."

An emotionless and icy voice rang out. It felt like getting stabbed in the back suddenly.

"Woah!?" Kyousuke jumped away and looked behind him.

A pair of sharp, rust-red eyes, with whites visible between the iris and the lower eyelids, was glaring straight at Kyousuke.

Akabane Kagura. The Akabane main family's second daughter, Eiri's younger sister. Dressed in a scarlet kimono, she was harshly showing hostility to the outsiders.

"W-When did you..."

By the way, Kyousuke and Ayaka happened to be standing in the center of the veranda.

Until a moment earlier, they had not heard the slightest sound of a footstep or a breath. Ayaka probably failed to notice because she had her head down. Half a beat later, she went "ah!"

"You're that girl who suddenly attacked Eiri-san but ended up subdued!"

"......Huh?"

Kagura's gaze turned even harsher. She shifted her gaze from Kyousuke to Ayaka.

Kyousuke went "Eh!?" and turned to look at Ayaka.

"Come on, what nonsense are you--"

"Nonsense? Onii-chan, you saw just now, right? This girl used a fan-like weapon to slice up the place in pursuit of Eiri-san, but got schooled in an instant. Fufu. Ayaka so surprised! Eiri-san is actually amazing, you know? Despite a surprise attack, she won so effortless--"

"Ayaka!"

Kyousuke covered Ayaka's innocent and tactless mouth with his hand.

"You're being way too rude here! You might be right but don't say 'got schooled in an instant' in front of others! What are you gonna do if she rushes over to slice you?"

"Then you'll protect Ayaka, right, Onii-chan?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Then there's nothing to worry about. Beat her to a pulp!"

"...Who is going to beat who?"

Accompanied by a very low voice, Kagura glared viciously at Ayaka.

But Ayaka showed no signs of fear. Going "hmph", she puffed out her flat chest and said:

"You'll get beaten to a pulp! My Onii-chan never loses to anyone. You can't even defeat Eiri-san, it's a hundred years too early for you to beat Onii-chan."

"--What?"

Ayaka taunted Kagura, causing her to frown.

Throwing a sideways glance at Kyousuke who was awkwardly going "Huhhhh!?", Kagura scoffed in disdain and went "That I would lose to this guy... Hmph. What a joke. Nee-san as an opponent would be a different matter, but a nobody like him? Let alone a hundred years, I'll chop his head off in two seconds."

"Chop his head off in two seconds? That sounds so lame. Wow. It's totally something a nobody would say."

"...I won't need even a second to chop you down."

"Wanna try?"

"Gladly--"

"Wait!"

Kyousuke stepped between the two girls.

"Stop arguing as soon as you meet! Anyway, calm down first!"

"I am very calm, right?"

"Ayaka is very calm, Onii-chan?"

"...Not really."

Kagura's eyes were abnormally bright while Ayaka's eyes had lost their glint.

They both looked suspiciously like they were going to kill off each other immediately.

Kagura even reached towards the metal fan at her waist. But no matter what, Ayaka was the one who picked the fight first, hence, Kyousuke apologized first as the older brother.

"Sorry that my little sister offended you. She said very rude things to you--"

"Not at all, this girl is the one who's rude!"

Ayaka pointed at Kagura with her index finger and denied.

"Ayaka only said the truth! Besides, this bitch even treated Onii-chan as an idiot... Insulting Onii-chan for being a nobody and even saying it'll only take two seconds, and that Onii-chan is a Casanova, a womanizer with no fidelity."

"She didn't say the last two things."

That wasn't how Ayaka viewed him, right?

Seeing Kyousuke getting sad about something weird, Kagura went "...hmph" disapprovingly.

"Are you so convinced that I'd lose against this guy? Rather than a joke, it's a total delusion... I am totally shocked. You're clearly a moron who can't even judge the opponent's level."

"You have no right to call Ayaka a moron. Ayaka is very smart!"

"Oh dear, more delusions? On what basis can you assert--"

"Because a certain someone is very stupid. I'm talking about Eiri-san."

"......What?"

Instantly, Kagura's expression changed dramatically.

"You're calling Nee-san... stupid?"

"Yeah. When the finals came out, she was ranked second last, you know? If Eiri-san is so stupid, Ayaka doesn't think the younger sister can be any better. Fufu. Oh, by the way, Ayaka was third, from the top."

Finally changing her nonchalant expression, Kagura clicked her tongue.

"Don't lump me with that useless person."

"How can you call her useless--"

"She's useless to begin with, right? Unable to kill anyone despite being an assassin. On this one point, you murderers might even be more professional than her. There should be limits to shaming the family. Sheesh... If only she never returned."

Murmuring to herself, her grumbles were filled with intense resentment.

Then drawing out her fan from her waist, she said:

"I am different from Nee-san... I can kill easily. In fact, I've already killed many times. It would only be a trivial matter for me to stain this fan--the iron fan blade 'Red Bird'--with your fresh blood. After all, I am very professional in this regard as an Akabane assassin."

With a wave of her hand, Kagura spread open the folded fan.

" "......!?" "

Ayaka backed away timidly while Kyousuke tensed up.

The expression on Kagura's face vanished.

Clad in white traditional socks, her feet then moved to make her departure--

"...However, you can relax. No orders to kill have been issued from above at the moment. Enjoy your life, you two. I'm done so let me take my leave."

Smiling without any cheer, Kagura walked past Kyousuke and Ayaka.

With wind from the opening of her fan, she casually threw out these words.

" "----" "

Just as she passed them, her rust-red eyes met their gaze. Her words implied the following:

Once I receive orders, I'll immediately kill you all.

The blades embedded in the fan glinted brightly under the summer sun.

Like a cold blade exposed from its sheath, murderous intent was seeping out slightly. Under that pressure, the Kamiya siblings remained too afraid to move for quite a while.

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"Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhh, release meeeeeee! Release meeeeeeeeeeeee~!"

"...Yawn."

The Kamiya siblings made their way towards the earlier guest room after parting ways with Kagura. As soon as they got near, they heard Renko screaming.

Puzzled and concerned, they rushed to the scene to see Renko subdued by Eiri in a reverse cross armlock, struggling strenuously on the floor.

Meanwhile, Eiri looked very relaxed while restraining Renko, yawning with boredom.

"...Oh, it's Kyousuke. Looks like you caught your prey successfully too."

"Yeah. Say, umm... What are you doing?"

"Nothing much. I subdued her because she wanted to escape—Yes!"

"Hikyahhhhhh!? It's gonna break, it's gonna break, if you pull so hard, the joint is gonna breaaaak! Stop pulling, forgive me! I won't run away anymore, I won't ruuuuun!"

"...Yeah yeah."

Eiri exhaled and stopped using the grappling hold.

Holding her shoulder, Renko went "shuko..." and stretched. Then Ayaka ran over to her side, hugging Renko's head--

"Are you okay, Renko-san!?"

"Oh Ayaka-chan... I won't, make it... Even it's on your own, you must run... Ack."

"Renko-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!? Sob... Ayaka got it. Even if Ayaka is the last one left, Ayaka will still search the house. Eiri-san's room must be found--"

"Hey. Time to go, Ayaka."

"--Oh okay."

"Ow!?"

Ayaka tossed Renko's head aside and stood up.

Losing support, Renko's head smashed hard against the floor.

"Shuko-- ...So mean. All I wanted was to have a look at your room. Why exactly are you so opposed to it? It's too bizarre."

"...Of course not. You'll surely ransack the place despite claiming 'to have a look.' "

"You've got something you don't want found? Foosh--"

"Huh? Not really. How could there be anything like that..."

The two girls argued while everyone walked towards the guest room together.

However, along the way, Renko went "now that we're, here show us around to get used to the environment! Stuff like where's the toilet." Hence, the group started to tour around.

While wandering the mansion, Kyousuke asked a question that had been bothering him the whole time.

"Eiri. Are you... on bad terms with your sister?"

"--Why do you ask?"

"Well, we ran into her earlier and--"

"Did she say something about me?"

"...Yeah."

Kyousuke did not know how to answer her question.

"Useless", "shaming the family", "if only she never returned"--Just as Kyousuke was wondering whether or not to report Kagura's verbal abuse...

"The Akabane's disgrace, useless, coward, idiot, shaming the family, shameless, retarded, incompetent, incapable... What else? Let me see, if only she never returned. That's pretty much it, right?"

Eiri effortlessly made a perfect guess.

"Huh!?" Kyousuke reacted in surprise, eliciting a wry smile from Eiri.

"...I hear her insulting me every day, all day along. That girls sees me as an eyesore. I already know this too well. The Akabane family is a matriarchy."

"Matriarchy? Does that mean girls are more likely to be born?"

"Yes. Red symbolizes blood, blood symbolizes birth, and birth is equated to females... Although that's not completely true, my family has always given rise to female heirs easily. Every generation's family head was a woman. The line of succession goes from the eldest daughter, second daughter, third daughter... finally the youngest daughter before the eldest son. As for the heads of the main family over the years, there were five second daughters and one third daughter... The rest were all eldest daughters. One more thing, Okaa-sama is also an eldest daughter."

While looking at the red flowers blooming in the courtyard, Eiri walked along the veranda.

Her voice sounded very calm while she recounted, seemingly indifferent.

"...But as luck would have it, I am unable to kill despite being the main family's eldest daughter. However, the natural talent I was blessed with is wasted on me, giving everyone unnecessary hopes, preventing them from giving up completely... The second daughter, Kagura, cannot accept that someone like me was born into the clan. A long time ago, before she found out I could not kill, she used to admire me very much."

Eiri looked very sad when talking about her younger sister.

Kagura hated Eiri but Eiri did not show any signs of hating Kagura. rather, she seemed to feel apologetic to her sister.

"...Is there no way to make up?"

"I doubt it. As long as I remain unable to kill."

"Hmm--"

Looking away from Kyousuke who fell into deep thought, Eiri looked at the courtyard.

Indeed, Eiri might be right. As soon as Eiri became a killer, Fuyou would make her the successor to the family business without a second word.

Kagura's reason for despising Eiri would vanish. The relationship between the sisters would improve.

The chagrin, sadness, conundrum, everything in Eiri's heart would be swept away.

"But Eiri, do you yourself really want to--"

Instantly, Eiri went "oh" and stopped walking.

She had apparently discovered something. She started staring at a certain corner in the courtyard.

"...Oh, what's with you?"

"Did you notice something interesting?"

Walking behind us, Renko and Ayaka stopped as well and followed Eiri's gaze.

The vast courtyard had large rocks and stone lanterns as well as an artificial landscape mae by laying out white gravel. In a corner of the courtyard, in front of the well-maintained greenery, there was a patch of red more vivid than that of the flowers.

Vermillion kimonos. Two figures were squatting there with their backs to Kyousuke's group. Judging from their size, they seemed to be children.

The two children were focused on playing with something in front of the flowerbed.

Snip! A strange sound could be heard.

Snip, snip, snip, snip.

" "......?" "

Probably sensing people watching them, the two children suddenly stopped what they were doing and turned their heads back.

Ayaka screamed "Kyah!?" Renko went "Uhyahhhhhhhh!?" Kyousuke gasped involuntarily.

The children's faces were a mess as though splattered with fresh blood.

" "...Ah." "

The two children reacted half a beat later. Their brown-red eyes widening greatly.

" "Eiri-oneechan!" "

Cheering excitedly, they rushed towards her in a straight line.

Their little hands swayed while they walked through the courtyard, holding gigantic shears. One black, one white. Painted in contrasting colors, the blades were dripping with a liquid resembling fresh blood, splattering to the side.

Swinging the dangerous weapons in their hands, the children ran towards them.

" "It's Eiri-oneechan, it's Eiri-oneechan!" "

"H-Hey... They look like they're heading for us!?"

"We need to counterattack together!?"

"No no! Run, Ayaka-chan! Quickly!"

" "It's Eiri-oneechan, it's Eiri-oneechan! It's Eiri-oneechan, it's Eiri-oneechan, it's Eiri-oneechaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan, woooooooooooooww!"

Just as Kyousuke, Renko and Ayaka panicked totally, the two children had already run over to them.

Kicking off their wooden clogs and ascending to the veranda, they then circled around Eiri--

"Eiri-oneechan, welcome home!"

"Welcome home, Eiri-oneechan!"

Chattering loudly, the two kids made a lot of noise. It felt like they were about to pounce. Fortunately, the shears and the blood splattered on their clothing prevented them. The children's hair and clothing was all soiled with some kind of liquid.

Eiri seemed quite used to it. Unfazed, she went "Yes, I'm back" and smiled.

"How are you, Ryou?"

"Good!"

The child named Ryou raised the black pair of shears high.

"You didn't catch a cold, did you, Ran?"

"Nope!"

The child named Ran gripped the white pair of shears tightly.

The two children's brown-red hair were cropped at shoulder length. They had identical faces. The same went for their figures without saying, but even their voices were the same. Apart from the shears, there was no way to tell them apart.

Ignoring Kyousuke and the others, the twins instantly chattered in rapid fire.

While playing with the shears in their hands, going snip snip--

"Eiri-oneechan, Eiri-oneechan." "Listen here, listen here!" "Something was hiding over there just now." "Something weird!"

"...Something weird?"

" "Yeah!" "

Ryou and Ran answered in unison.

Even their breaths were in perfect sync.

"So it was just a joke. Tsk..."

"--Sensei?"

Eiri was originally glaring at Fuyou in exasperation. Now she narrowed her eyes at Busujima.

Busujima was wallowing in disappointment when he instantly waved his hands in a panic.

"You heard it wrong, I was just joking too, okay? That goes without saying! Hahaha... I'm a teacher after all. No matter how pretty the other person is, I can't possibly commit adultery with a parent--"

"There is no adultery here, Sensei."

"Huh?"

"My husband has already passed away long time ago."

" "......!?" "

Instantly, Eiri's shoulder shook

Busujima's expression read "crap, I stepped on a landmine."

"Eiri's father... has already passed away? Forgive me for being forward, but it sounds like--"

"Indeed, six years ago, he suddenly lost his life during a job. He was thirty-two."

Fuyou lowered her eyes and answered.

"The risk of dying on the job is ever present in the line of work that is assassination. Our life expectancy in this career is very short... Dying at the age of thirty-two, that was the life he had chosen. However, my late husband was quite an outstanding assassin, so it was probably poor luck...

A the time, my eldest daughter Eiri was ten while Ryou and Ran were only three."

" " "----" " "

For a moment, Kyousuke and the others were at a loss how to respond and could only keep their heads bowed silently.

The twins made a sound with sad faces.

A suffocating silence descended.

Something swept this atmosphere away. It was Fuyou clapping her hands.

"Excuse me. I have embarrassed myself, to think I made my guests worry... Please do not let my late husband's death weigh on your mind. The children and I have gotten over it already. It's been six years now, hasn't it, Eiri?"

Confronted with Fuyou's question, Eiri did not answer. She was biting her lip so hard it was almost white. Her face was directed towards the ground. Sitting next to her, Kyousuke was very worried and peered at the side of her face.

"...Eiri?"

"Oh dear. Eiri is a child who loved and respected her father very much."

A wry smile surfaced on Fuyou's face while she narrowed her blood-red eyes.

"...However, I believe your father will be sad if you make such an expression. The Bon Festival starts today. Our deceased ancestors will return to the human world during this occasion--Listen to me, Eiri. When your father returns, we will greet him with smiling faces, won't we?"

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Food was served onto the table via the hands of the Noh-mask wearing lady-in-waiting.

Stewed dishes, stir-fried dishes, deep-fried dishes, cold appetizers, salads, soups, pickles... Laden on the red lacquerware was a feast of great quantities.

The low table was very long and was filled by these dishes all at once.

"Wow, it's magnificent... This meal is super grand."

"Even the food beats a hotel? Looks really delicious!"

"What's this? Slow torture? I'm the only one who can't eat any of it!?"

"...How about eating in the storeroom?"

"Eh!? No way, it's not fun eating alone. The main point of meals is not about the food but who you're eating with! That's why, I'm not disappointed at all... I... a-am not disappointed."

"There there. Hurry and wipe those tears."

"I can't wipe them with the mask on, wahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The few of them were chattering noisily while sitting on seat cushions that had been prepared in advance.

Seated in sequence from the head of the table were Busujima, Kyousuke, Renko and Ayaka.

Then there was Eiri--

"......Tsk."

She was sitting opposite Busujima, on Kagura's left.

Kagura was clicking her tongue loudly on purpose but Eiri remained unfazed.

After the earlier incident, Kyousuke and the others had buried Busujima's dead pets behind the mansion and even erected a tombstone. Then they watched television until dinner, a luxury not available in school, chatted away casually and even discussed their upcoming itinerary, spending time leisurely in their room.

No one brought up Eiri's late father, who had passed away six years ago. When Eiri returned to the room, she looked the same as usual without any suffering on her face.

Currently, with her eyelids half-lowered, she was yawning lazily as usual.

"So hungry, Ryou-kun!"

"Wanna eat soon, Ran-chan!"

The twins were sitting to the right of Kagura, chattering and playing around. Last to appear, Fuyou came to the side of the long table and sat down where everyone was within her view.

"Thank you for your patience, everyone. I have already bidden the branch families to return. Thus, all members of the Akabane main family are present. Let us begin without ado."

Following Fuyou's action, Kyousuke and the others put their hands together.

" " "Thanks for the food!" " " They all spoke in unison then picked up their red lacquer chopsticks.

It was six in the evening. THe location was the banquet hall in the Akabane main residence. Thus a harmonious banquet for nine began.

Fuyou poured a local fine wine for Busujima. Eiri asked her:

"...Okaa-sama, are Nii-san and Muramasa away?"

"Yes, they are working. Basara is expected to return tomorrow morning if things go according to plan. Muramasa is currently abroad and probably won't make it back in time to participate in the Bon Festival."

"I see... So the same as always, busy as ever."

Fuyou's mention of "work" meant assassination, of course. As the only member of the family unable to kill, Eiri made a complicated expression.

"And on the other hand, you are leisurely as always," mocked Kagura.

As soon as she said that, Fuyou continued with a surprising statement.

"Originally, Kagura was supposed to be busy with work until tonight... But she apparently wanted to see Eiri earlier and finished the job cleanly and quickly. Fufu, I can't believe her. Ever since coming home this morning, she has been restless all day without even taking a nap, you know?"

"—Pfffft!"

Upon hearing that, Kagura spat out the deep-fried beancurd with sauce she was eating.

"Fuyou-sama!? Please don't say things that'll cause misunderstandings! Taking care of the job swiftly was because conditions were favorable by chance. As for not sleeping and feeling restless, that's because I wanted to chop her down with an overhead swing of the blade at the first moment! I-It's not like it's because I wanted to see her--"

"You've got a bit of beancurd on your lip there, Kagura?"

"Don't touch me!"

Kagura swatted away Eiri's hand that was holding a handkerchief, acting rather violently. After wiping the corner of her mouth strenuously, she distanced herself from Eiri. Blushing with displeasure, Kagura started to clear the table.

Fuyou poured wine into her own cup and smiled wryly with a "my goodness."

Facing the side where Kyousuke's group was seated, she inquired:

"How does our food taste, everyone? I hope it is agreeable with your palate."

"Yes, it's very tasty!"

Ayaka's cheeks were stuffed bulging with pumpkin stew, her face all smiles.

Kyousuke picked up a bit of tomato agar with his chopsticks and kept nodding with "good stuff" no matter which dish he tried. All were at standards above ordinary family cooking. Most likely, they had hired a professional chef.

Speaking of catering at the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation, everything tasted like kitchen waste, so the food here felt even more enjoyable to eat in contrast.

Savoring raw horse meat together with a local fine wine, Busujima commented:

"Oh my, both the wine and food are so good. Did you personally prepare all the cooking yourself, by any chance...?"

"Yes. However, due to larger quantities tonight, I had Kagura help out."

" " "Eh!?" " "

Kyousuke, Renko and Ayaka all looked at Kagura at the same time.

"......Do you have business with me?"

"No, but how to put it, basically--"

"So surprising. It's unbelievable that you can do high-class cooking."

"Hmm~ Well, who knows? Maybe we just happened to miss the dishes she made. Among all this delicious food, there might be terribly disgusting failures mixed in--"

"None at all. Mere cooking is just following steps in sequence. I have no idea what goes through the mind of people who fail in cooking. Where do you find morons like those?"

Kyousuke's group silently pointed to Kagura's neighboring seat.

"...W-What?"

Eiri frowning, in the middle of eating tempura.

"You don't know how to cook?"

"----"

Eiri froze for a moment then averted eye contact and answered:

"A little, with a few dishes... more serious than others?"

Kagura's chopsticks fell on the floor with a clatter.

"N-Nee-san... You must be joking, right? You can't cook, can't study, can't kill. Then tell me, what exactly can you do?"

"...Breathe, I guess."

"Breathe!? That's something even bugs can do. There should be limits to incompetence! The ancestors will laugh, to think that the the Akabane main family's eldest daughter is such a sorry excuse. It's a disgrace to all the living descendants. Could you please end your breathing immediately and die a little... If you don't mind, how about I do it for you?"

"Impossible. You failed even when you ambushed me earlier."

"Wha... F-Fine! I'll chop you to death right away--"

"Stop, Kagura! No drawing of blades at the dining table!"

"......Understood. My apologies, Fuyou-sama."

Kagura returned to her seat with a suffering expression after getting scolded by Fuyou. Eiri nonchalantly sipped her soup despite the narrow escape from getting attacked with a blade.

The way these two sisters interacted was truly abnormal.

The weather was clearly so hot but the situation was making Kyousuke break out in cold sweat. At this moment, Renko tugged at Kyousuke's sleeve.

"Hey hey, Kyousuke. Want me to feed you with the 'say ah' method?"

"...The 'say ah' method? I can eat on my own, no thanks."

"Hmm? There's no harm, right, Kyousuke? What do you take our relationship for?"

"Shut up. Just be quiet and drink your jelly."

"Come, say ah? ..."

"I already said no! Also, why is it jelly instead of food!?"

"Yes. An indirect kiss, hmm? Bashful bashful."

"It's not an indirect kiss if you use a straw, right?"

"Now that you say that, how about a direct kiss? Smooch--"

"The gas mask is in the way! Stay away, it's scary!"

" "----" "

Seeing Kyousuke and Renko making a ruckus, rust-red eyes of disdain shot at them.

Kagura joined in with Eiri's scornful gaze, glaring viciously at Kyousuke.

"U-Umm... What's wrong?"

"Aren't you Nee-san's boyfriend?"

"Huh!?"

"Ehhhh!?"

"--Pffft!?"

Kyousuke and Renko were totally shocked, while Eiri spurted out all the soup she was sipping.

"...Weird?" Kagura's face was filled with surprise.

"I thought you shared that sort of relationship. Going out with Nee-san while messing around with other girls, what a shameless man who deserves to die... That was what I used to think. But it looks like I was mistaken. Your girlfriend is actually the girl with the gas mask?"

"Yes, that's right. Foosh--"

"Don't 'that's right' me! I'm not going out with anyone, okay!?"

"...Is that true, Nee-san?"

Kagura looked beside her. Eiri was wiping the table with a handkerchief. She was blushing to her ears already, speaking in quite a rattled voice:

"Doesn't that go without saying!? W-W-W-W-W-Who would want this kind of useless guy... Impossible. Stop spouting nonsense, Kagura! Are you retarded!?"

"S-Sorry..."

Unexpectedly, Kagura apologized readily.

"Indeed, there is no way you would fall for this unimpressive guy. Even for you, I might gone too far in what I said."

"...Sigh. You'd better know it. Watch your words carefully, Kagura."

"Yes... I am terribly sorry."

"Do you two really hate me that much?"

For Kagura, who had kept her harsh tongue act the whole time, to admit she had gone too far in what she said...

Kyousuke felt especially depressed about the indirect insults--

"Apologize."

--Woosh!

A red object flew past.

"...Hmm!?"

Kagura tilted her head to dodge in the nick of time. A slender and dangerous weapon would have pierced her eyeball's earlier position a second ago. A splash was heard in the pond in the courtyard not far from the veranda.

"Wha--"

She turned towards where the object had come flying from...

"Apologize to Onii-chan. Would you like to die or apologize?"

Ayaka had gotten up on one knee, her right hand in follow through after throwing something, currently staring at Kagura with eyes that had lost their shine. The red lacquered chopsticks in her hand had disappeared.

Ayaka had launched her chopsticks, aiming for Kagura's eyeballs.

Kyousuke felt a layer of cold sweat surface on his forehead.

"H-Hey... Ayaka, calm down--"

--Woosh!

Kyousuke had barely leaned forward when a white flash flew past this time.

This light tore through the air and flew straight, shaving off a few millimeters of one of Ayaka's twintails, finally embedding itself in the sliding door. It was a metal fan fitted with a blade.

Kagura got up without hurry with one eyed narrowed with murderous intent.

"...I presume you are prepared to die, seeing as you dared to ambush me with a sneak attack? To show the intent to kill against the Akabane, your life will be taught the flavor of regret."

"Right back at you. Insulting Onii-chan is a crime. You would do best to go to hell, never to expect salvation."

"Ayaka! Why are you suddenly doing this!? Stop it right now!"

Kyousuke frantically circled over and restrained Ayaka. Apart from that--

"Kagura! Put your blades away! What are you taking an amateur seriously for!?"

Blocking in front of Kagura, Eiri persuaded her little sister.

Ayaka and Kagura's gazes clashed with sparks erupting.

"This girl is so annoying. Allow me to cut out your throat, which is so adept at making noise, okay?"

"Fufu. Looks like we're thinking the same thing? Ayaka hates you too. So there, die!"

"Dinner tonight is so fun, Ryou-kun! Come, say ah?"

"It's fun as long as you're here, Ran-chan. Come, say ah?"

Unconcerned about the insults and dangerous weapons being thrown back and forth across the dining table, the twins fed each other.

As for Busujima, he inquired of Fuyou who was pouring wine:

"...Shouldn't you stop them?"

"No need. It will end on its own without intervention. By the way, Sensei, let us have a good chat since it is not every day that fellow professionals in the same trade get together."

"S-Sure..."

"Hey hey. Can I have a bit of that wine there?"

"No! You're still a minor."

"Indeed. Drinking would be against the law, yes? However, you asked at the perfect time. I would like to learn more about you. Rumors say that you were created purely for *killing*... Could you share some details with me to liven up the drinking atmosphere?"

"Stop! I cannot make exceptions for this either. Hikawa-san's details is top secret on our side. How could I easily reveal--"

"You seriously... can't?"

"Woah!? I-I suppose? Maybe if it's just a little bit..."

"...Showing that pervert face again. What a disgrace."

Busujima was going red in the face while Fuyou held his hand. Renko shook her head and went "hopeless hopeless."

Meanwhile, Kyousuke and Eiri were still intervening in the angry between their younger sisters.

"Sorry, it's my little sister's fault! I'll scold her later, so could you please let her off?"

"No, that girl is the one at fault. Onii-chan, you don't need to apologize!"

"...Yes. It's my sister's bad, so sorry, okay? Also, I accidentally got carried away together with her just now--"

"Nee-san, what are you apologizing to them for!? If you give in here, it will be a taint to the Akabane's honor!"

Ayaka and Kagura glared at each other across the table.

They had become bitter enemies after meeting only recently. Although the killing intent had subsided, their burning rage showed no signs of cooling off.

Dozens of minutes went by--

By the time the two girls calmed down, most of the food had already gone cold.

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"Foosh--What a fun meal, Kyousuke?"

"...I guess."

After the lively dinner ended, it was already after 8pm.

Kyousuke was watching a variety show on television when Renko came over to talk to him.

Eiri and Ayaka had gone to take a bath. Busujima was in the toilet. The low table was shifted over to lay out the futons. Currently, Kyousuke and Renko were alone in the room.

They had already changed into pajamas after taking baths. The yukatas had dark blue patterns on a white background, giving a sense like they were staying at an inn.

But the bizarre gas mask was destroying the good atmosphere completely.

"Shuko-- ...I'd really like to take a bath together with everyone too. Staring at food I can't eat, staying at differing accommodations. I'm the only one facing biased treatment, right? Hey, it's a huge difference, right?"

"...You're right."

"Damn straight, it's a huge difference! By the way, this gas mask is friggin' hot! I can't wipe the sweat away, it's hot, stuffy and uncomfortable, ahhhhhhhhhhhhh, I hate it!"

Reaching out, she grabbed it and pulled hard while going "hngghhhhhh!", rolling around on the futon.

However, the belt had already been locked so there was no way to remove it so easily. In the end, what came loose was not the gas mask but her yukata.

Renko was lying spreadeagle with her chest heaving up and down, the front of her yukata wide open.

"Shuko-- Shuko-- ...Ooh. I'd rather wear the mask, so how about letting me sleep here? Sleeping alone in a storeroom is too sad. With the mask on, sleeping together is fine, right?"

"...I guess you're right."

"Yeah! But my stress rises straight up if I keep wrapped up the whole time... Hmm? What should I do? Which do you like better, Kyousuke?"

"...I guess you're right."

"----"

Renko stood up without saying a word and glared at Kyousuke. Watching a variety show he could not watch in school, Kyousuke did not look at her.

He would burst out laughing from time to time and even make snide comments.

A this moment, a pop sounded from her temple near the gas mask.

"Hahaha, 'Manson Hearts' is so funny... Eh, they're going to broadcast a two-hour special next week!? But I won't be able to watch it... So sad."

"I'm the one who's saaaaaaaad!"

Renko's sanity was ripped to shreds and she pounced on Kyousuke.

"Nwahhhhh!?" Crying out in surprise, Kyousuke was pinned to the floor, fallen on the futon, straddled by her at her mercy. Renko's yukata was a mess with her breasts almost falling out completely.

With her body sitting on his belly, Kyousuke could smell a strong fragrance of soap.

"Me or the TV, which is more important!? We get private time together rare enough as it is!"

"E-Even if you ask me that... Anyway, can you get off first?"

"No! I won't get off! Unless you say you love me, Kyousuke, I refuse to get off!"

"...Huhu."

"Stop watching televisioooooooooooon!"

Pinned down with his head on the ground, Kyousuke was still engrossed with watching television, making Renko fly into a rage.

She grabbed the lapels of her yukata, intending to strip herself completely.

"Hey.. Dumbass, stop it! What are you doing!?"

"Foosh--You were careless to be alone with me, you know? Since you won't look at me, I have to do something to make you stare at me. Come, come, Kyousuke, have a good close look... I allow you to do whatever you want to this body. You're a man after all, so you'll surely comply with joy, right?"

"......?"

For an instant, Kyousuke felt himself wavering in spite of himself. His gaze was forcefully drawn to her.

Not just those breasts. The slightly moist strands of silver hair, pink skin, that seductive collarbone, slender shoulders, then finally, the gas mask, as well as his memories of the face beneath, Kyousuke could not tear his eyes off her.

To be killed the moment her feelings were requited, he should know that very well...

"Oh my? You didn't resist as intensely as I imagined."

Renko reached towards Kyousuke's face, her slender fingers roving along his cheek--

"You really wanna do it too, right? Very much? Very well... You can see that I can't use my mouth, so I'll use other parts to pleasure you--"

"Ayaka's back, Onii-chan!"

Just as Kyousuke was in a crisis, Ayaka happened to return.

Having finished her bath, her twintails were let down and she was dressed in a yukata--

"Eiri-san's home has such a grand bathroom too? Her parental home has an open-air bath, so surprising. The bathtub is made of cypress wood too! It's so great so Ayaka accidentally stayed for too long--"

The moment Ayaka spotted Kyousuke and Renko's posture, she suddenly froze.

Smiling while watching the scene, time ticked away, one second, two seconds, three seconds, four seconds...

"Sorry for disturbing."

--Slam! Ayaka closed the sliding door and escaped.

Kyousuke hastily pushed Renko away and ran down the corridor.

"Don't go, don't go, wait! It's not like that, you got the wrong idea!"

"...Hmm, wrong idea about what? Ayaka didn't see anything, you know?"

Ayaka looked back. Her eyes were very indifferent. Her voice was very calm.

The was 100% misunderstood. Ayaka chuckled and said:

"Say, you'd better return to the room sooner. Don't worry, Onii-chan. No one will come here for now. Ayaka will keep watch at the door, so just enjoy yourself fully."

"Like I said, you got the wrong idea, okay!? Cut the nonsense and come here!"

"Ehhhh!? T-T-T-T-T-Three people together!? Suddenly asking that of Ayaka, that's too hard, way too high level! Please, give Ayaka some time first! At least let Ayaka prepare~~~~~~!"

"Stop misunderstanding! We seriously weren't doing anything!"

"...What are you doing?"

While the Kamiya siblings were making a scene in the corridor, someone called out to them in surprise

Kyousuke took a closer look to see Eiri, frowning, fresh out of a bath just like Ayaka.

"...I don't care, since it's not my business after all. I brought popsicles for you guys, so stop standing there and go inside. They're gonna melt."

"Oh, okay...?"

Eiri lifted up a bag of popsicles. She was wearing a yukata with a pattern of strawberries and hearts on white background. The sash was tied in a butterfly bow in front of her with a checkered design of red tartan.

Unlike the guest yukatas that Kyousuke and the others were wearing, Eiri's was her own personal one.

Dressed in childish casual clothing with her ponytail let down and her makeup completely removed, Eiri gave off a much younger impression than usual.

Kyousuke could not help but stare intently at her. Eiri glared back in return.

"What are you staring at?"

"N-Nothing..."

"Sorry for walking around without wearing makeup! I just took a bath, so showing a plain face is very normal... C-Could you quit staring at me? It's very embarrassing... N-No, very annoying!"

Turning her face to one side, Eiri scolded harshly.

Her face was reddened after a bath with a faint flush. Her forceful attitude did not feel very menacing. Was it because she was not wearing makeup?

"Eiri, you're actually--"

"...I-I'm what?"

"Cuter without makeup, aren't you?"

"......!?"

Eiri's eyes widened. She looked extremely surprised.

She stood there frozen for a while before going "...hmph" through her nose--

"...Huh? What rubbish are you talking about? Stop it. Such creepy words, what's there to talk about!? Shut your trap. Your evil intentions are too blatant. No dice. No dice okay? Do you think you can win me over with just a few compliments? A-Are you retarded!?"

Eiri tossed her hair meaninglessly while scolding him.

Kyousuke went "no no no" and denied.

"I'm not flattering you, okay? You look really pretty with makeup, Eiri, but right now, you're going the cute route. Your eyes look more gentle and a little less adult. It's quite a sight already. In fact, you don't have to try so hard going for a mature style, y'know?"

Kyousuke voiced his true thoughts but Eiri chose to look down.

Did he say something wrong to displease her? Kyousuke felt very anxious.

"W-What I mean is... Eiri, you're normally quite cute too? Like when there's a gap between your appearance and what's inside, or when you unintentionally smile. It's just that since you're so cute even if you don't put on makeup, I think you don't have to try so hard to look nice... Forget that for now, your casual clothing is so cute too! What patterns are those? Strawberries? Hearts? Also flowers and cookies! They're such a great match. The cute you matched with a cute yukata, it's ultimately cuteness!?"

"......up."

Eiri's voice leaked out at a much lowered volume.

Trying to ease the mood, praising her nonstop, Kyousuke felt totally lost.

"U-Umm... Eiri? Why do you look so pissed off--"

"SHUT UP, idiot!"

Eiri yelled and suddenly looked up.

With a face as red as strawberries, she spoke angrily:

"Saying cute cute cute cute nonstop... What are you thinking? Can't you find a better word to use? It sounds so irritating, annoying and infuriating. Shut up you idiot--!"

"Hgoh!?"

Eiri aimed at Kyousuke's mouth and stuffed in a popsicle still in its wrapper.

Leaving the suffocating Kyousuke on the side, she went "hmph!" and left.

"Cough, cough, urgh... What the heck!?"

"Oh dear. Don't mind her, Onii-chan."

Kyousuke pulled out the "gorigori-kun" (banana-flavored) popsicle from his mouth, all sticky with saliva, and kept coughing. Watching things from the side, Ayaka helped by stroking his back.

"Eiri-san is so inexperienced... Kusukusu."

"...What are you giggling for? Is it that funny to see a popsicle stuffed in your brother's mouth?"

"No, that's not it, Ayaka was just talking to herself! So this is the situation... Very rich family, Eiri-san might be quite a good candidate after all? By the way, deducting points for crappy grades and not knowing how to cook, Renko-san's top spot is still not threatened yet. The way Ayaka sees it, she barely passes...?"

Ayaka took out a notebook and a pen from somewhere and started writing.

She was murmuring to herself while walking towards the room. She looked like she was calculating some kind of ranking(?) involving Renko and Eiri, but Kyousuke could not be sure.

Left behind, Kyousuke scratched his head and said:

"Eh!? It started melting already..."

Taking off the wrapper and pulling the popsicle out, he sucked on it while returning to the room.

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"Take that, revolution! Victory is in my hands!"

"What a shame, here's revolution in return! Nothing is ever that easy, Renko-san?"

"Double revolution right back atchaaaaaaaa!"

"W-W-W-W-W-What are you talking about--!?"

"Foosh--Looks like I still hold the upper hand, Ayaka-chan?"

"...Triple revolution back at you."

"No way!? That's too resilient! No good, I can't return it... Shuko--With these cards, it's totally a dead end."

Renko abandoned her remaining two cards and collapsed on the futon.

The two cards were a three of hearts and a four of spades respectively.

"...Fine, it's over. Get out of the capital."

Eiri tossed out a card indifferently and snickered smugly.

"Nngugugugug..." Renko got up, gnashing her teeth in frustration.

"What is this? You're clearly such a big flat chest!"

"What big flat chest--Is it big or is it small, be clear!"

"You can tell just by looking..."

"...T-That's true for sure."

"You two can go to hell."

Eiri glared at them and reached for the snacks.

It was 10pm right now. Kyousuke and friends were gathered in the room, playing cards.

Old Maid, Sevens, Concentration, Pig's Tail, Extreme Needy... While playing various card games, they drank juice and ate snacks that Eiri had brought.

Such luxuries were absolutely not allowed in the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation. Intending to enjoy their freedom on behalf of Maina who could not come along, Kyousuke's group had as much fun as possible.

While they were in high spirits, as their custodial supervisor, Busujima was--

'Ahaha! Ahahaha! Ahahahahahaha! What a spoilt little pampered boy you are?'

--In the neighboring room, playing and frolicking with poisonous creatures. Since it was such a repulsive sight, they had the sliding door closed so all they could hear was the sound.

SInce Eiri was going to sleep in her own room, in the end, the rooms were split up with the Kamiya siblings sharing one and Busujima getting the other. Not needing to share a room with that kind of man, Kyousuke breathed a sigh of relief from the bottom of his heart.

Renko shuffled the cards deftly and asked the group:

"By the way, when do you plan on sleeping tonight?"

"...Any time will do? Just sleep when we've had enough of playing."

"Playing all the way until the middle of the night... Probably not. Renko-san probably needs to go to the storeroom to take off the gas mask."

"Well, if it's just one night, I can endure it..."

"I don't wanna stay up, okay? All nighters are bad for the skin."

"Eh? That's quite focused on maintenance. Because Eiri-san's face is the only good part to look at."

"Well yeah, Eiri is very cute. Doubly cute without makeup!"

"...!? C-Cute--"

Eiri's snacks fell from from her hand as her face went red.

"So cute so cute, Eiri-san is so cute! Dressed in yukata, cuteness goes triple!"

"Yo, yukata beauty! Yukata goes well with you! Because you're flat chested, cuteness goes for quadruple!"

"Huh!? Q-Quit saying that... What the heck!? You guys are taking me for a fool, aren't you!? To call me cute, that's---"

"I'm going to the washroom."

" " "------" " "

Kyousuke was just about to stand up when the three girls glared coldly at him.

He went "eh!?" in a dilemma, frozen in a half-squatting pose. Because the girls had ignored him and were getting noisy on their own, Kyousuke thought it was the right time to make a trip to the toilet...

"W-What? What's wrong? Why are you glaring at me like that?"

"...Nothing."

"Oh? Oh Kyousuke... It's a rare chance to make Eiri shy."

"It'll be so fun if we could deliver a fatal blow here. Can't believe you're so oblivious at a critical moment, Onii-chan."

"...? I don't get it. Can I go to the toilet now?"

"Don't go asking permission for that kind of thing, okay!? It'll be gross if you wet yourself here, so hurry and go, leaker!"

"...Leaker? If you really want to categorize, he'd lean more towards premature ejaculation, right?"

"Well about that? Hold on, based on what Ayaka has personally seen of Onii-chan's thingy--"

"Shut the fuck up! Stop chatting weird topics, okay...?"

Feeling a headache from all the sexually suggestive girl talk, Kyousuke left the room. His destination was the washroom at the end of the hallway. Thus he walked along the deserted corridor.

Creak, creak... The wooden floorboards made sounds while he walked, echoing in the quiet darkness. Many years must have passed since these floorboards were finished. It could be seen from the wear and tear and stains on the timber.

Aside from that, there was the rigid image of this being a bloodstained family and a feeling that something might jump out any time. There were other possibilities. No one could say for certain that the Akabane family would not seize the moment to attack as soon as any of them were alone.

Thinking that, Kyousuke felt scared and on edge.

He naturally walked faster and faster, looking around for no reason. I shoulda asked someone to accompany me--Kyousuke thought and started to regret.

He had just looked straight forward when a red figure appeared standing before him.

"Uwahhhhhhhhhh!?"

Kyousuke screamed and backed away but unexpectedly tripped. He fell flat on his ass while a pair of rust-red eyes looked down at him from above.

"......What is the meaning of this? Such a big reaction."

The figure's tone of voice was as merciless as her gaze, Eiri's younger sister--Kagura--probably while Kyousuke was checking out the situation behind him, she had turned around the corner to appear.

Kagura was dressed in red yukata and deliberately clicked her tongue loudly.

"To scream just from the sight of someone's face... You are such a rude person. And not only that, a coward like no other. I have no interest in striking the weak, so there's no need to be so afraid, okay?"

Kagura mocked him then was about to turn around and leave.

"Hey Kagura! Wait--"

"What is it?"

She stopped and looked back. Eyes half-narrowed, over her shoulder, she looked at Kyousuke.

"Please don't go calling other people's names directly. It is most displeasing."

"Umm. S-Sorry... Then how about this? Akabane."

"Don't go uttering my family name. You are not worthy."

"W-Well... Sorry, Kagura-chan."

"Don't call me that. The notion of you addressing me with '-chan' brings me goosebumps."

"......Eiri's sister."

"Denied. Don't mention that failure's name."

"Then how should I address you...?"

"Not allowed to address me."

"No no no..."

--How much does she hate me? Ever since the heated conflict erupted between her and Ayaka during dinner, she seemed to treat the older brother, Kyousuke, harsher and harsher. Moreover, Kagura and Ayaka still had not reconciled.

Kyousuke really did not know what to do. Kagura looked at him and sighed.

"What is so good about this guy...?"

She murmured quietly then started walking without looking back.

Kagura intended to leave the same way she had arrived.

"...By the way? Why did you come this way?"

The secondary residence where Kyousuke and the others were staying should not be part of Kagura's daily area of activity. If she was coming here to do something, why did she turn back as soon as she ran into him?

The question surfaced in Kyousuke's mind. Kagura clicked her tongue at him. The series of movements greatly resembled her elder sister Eiri.

"...Nothing important. Even if there were, it is none of your business, right?"

"True, but it's only natural to feel curious, right?"

No matter what, her job was being an assassin. Someone who must not be underestimated. Kyousuke began to guess randomly about what secret intentions they might have.

"...Such a suspicious nature. I already told you clearly it is none of your business. You have no need to worry about it. Just go and have a pillow fight in leisure."

--Pillow fight. Did she think they were on a school trip?

Kyousuke felt it was truly sad that he could not deny it readily.

"No, actually, we're not having a pillow fight... Everyone is playing cards together. If you'd like, wanna join us? Eiri's there too."

"No thanks."

She answered swiftly. Kyousuke asked, knowing that chances were slim. Kagura answered very coldly.

"What reason is there that I must play with you guys...? Your little sister, that arrogant little lass is there too, right? I very well might kill her if I ran into her again this time."

"Little lass... Aren't you the same age as Ayaka? And didn't you say you have no interest in striking the weak?"

"You're are seriously annoying."

Kagura threw Kyousuke a look of disdain.

"...In terms of mental age, I am more mature than her. Although I have no intention of striking the weak, it's a separate matter if she picks a fight on her own. When that happens, I will repay her mercilessly, got that?"

"Please can you forgive her? I'll apologize for my sister's rudeness."

"...Hmph. Listening to your apologies is a pain for me."

Kagura tossed her hair with displeasure on her face.

"Talking to you only builds up more stress for me. Excuse me for taking my leave. Tell Nee-san for me, 'if you've got time to be shuffling cards, you might as well use it to learn how to kill.' Just that--"

"If Eiri kills someone, will you change your attitude?"

Just as she was about to leave, Kyousuke posed a question to her back.

Kagura thought over this silently then said "...regarding that" and bowed her head:

"When that happens, I could recognize her. Although in my view, the chances are very slim... Trash like her cannot possibly kill anyone."

"That's right."

"......What?"

Kagura looked at Kyousuke with considerable puzzlement in her face.

Taking on her stabbing gaze, Kyousuke smiled.

"After all, Eiri is a very kind girl. It's hard to imagine her hurting and killing people. Am I right, Kagura?"

"----"

Kagura fell silent at the question.

Her eyes widened slightly then she looked away.

Finally, she left these words behind in annoyance.

"...Don't sound so familiar. I've already warned you."

Goodbye--Kagura turned her face away and left without looking back.

Watching her leave, Kyousuke could not help but begin to speculate baselessly.

Perhaps Kagura was visiting the secondary residence because she was curious how Eiri was getting along with them.

Originally planning to observe from outside in secret, she did not expect to run into Kyousuke, which left her no choice but to turn back... Perhaps that was what happened. Kyousuke pictured his speculation in his mind.

When he called Eiri a "kind girl", for just an instant, Kagura almost made an expression of joy.

It could very likely be his imagination, but at least she did not deny it.

In that case, Kyousuke decided to believe in her.

"After all... They're blood-related sisters."

As Eiri's sister, she should not be some kind of villain.

While praying she was not a villain, Kyousuke resumed walking.

Scene 2 - Broken Wings / "Fear, and Loathing For Loss"

August 13 (Tuesday) Sunny

Today, I'm almost starving to death.

With no choice, I had to go out but why did I get hassled the moment I left my room?

It was that Michirou-kun who's always going on and on about his left arm.

I really don't get what he's talking about.

Just as I had no idea what to do, Bob-chan came to the rescue.

Chihiro-chan was there too.

Then the four of us hung out together (Michirou-kun tagged along).

We ate and did homework together.

Also chatted about lots of things.

Chihiro-chan almost ate me several times.

Lucky that Bob-chan saved me.

Michirou-kun used me as his shield so many times.

These people are really weird.

But being with them is fun.

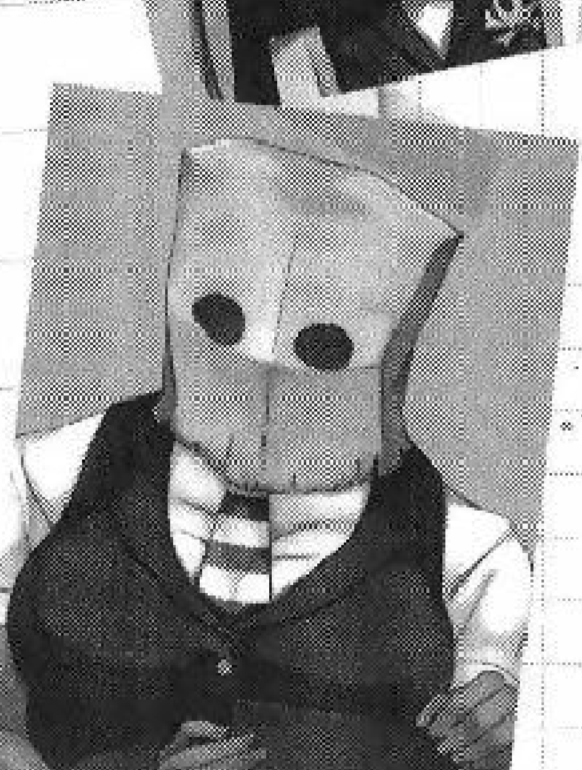
Hopefully, tomorrow will be like today.

Fear and Loathing For Loss

手折られた翼 第二幕

8月13日（火）

今日はお腹がすいて死んじゃいそうだったので
外に出ました。そしたら早速からまれました。
いつも左手がどうのこうの言ってるミチローくんです。
何をしゃべっているのかよくわからないので
困っていると、ボブちゃんが助けてくれました。
千尋ちゃんもいます。
その後は4人で（ミチローくんもついてきました）
一緒にごはんを食べたり、宿題をしたり、
たくさんお話ししたりしました。
何回か千尋ちゃんに食べられかけましたけど、
ボブちゃんが助けてくれました。
ミチローくんは何度もわたしを盾にしてました。
とってもおかしな人たちで、
とっても楽しかったです。
明日もこんな1日だといいな。



"Good morning, everyone! Did you all sleep well last night? Foosh--"

The next morning. After folding up their futons, Kyousuke and company were met with the arrival of Renko, led by the lady-in-waiting. As always, Renko was in excited spirits early in the morning.

Unlike the Kamiya siblings were who still in pajamas, she had changed into a tank top with ripped jeans. With the limiter also put on properly, her usual getup was all in place.

"......Morning."

"Good morning, Renko-san!"

Kyousuke was still sleepy eyed while Ayaka greeted energetically. Renko went "oh my?" and tilted her head. The idiot hair on the top of her head shook a few times.

"You look like you still wanna sleep, Kyousuke. Didn't you run off to bed soon after that last night?"

"Umm, no--"

"Although we broke off at midnight, it wasn't until dawn that I fell asleep."

Due to getting roused at 7am, Kyousuke actually slept for only three hours. Rubbing his heavy eyelids, he yawned.

"It's all Ayaka's fault for not letting me sleep the whole time..."

"Ehehe, it's been so long since Ayaka got to sleep with Onii-chan, that's why! Ayaka really had to enjoy it, so that's that."

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!? What did you two siblings do!?"

"Kusukusu. It's a secret. Not even Renko-san can be told!"

"......Suspicious."

There was actually nothing suspicious. They simply chatted while lying down.

Every time Kyousuke was about to fall asleep, she would pat him on the cheek. The two of them shared a blanket, as close together as ever. Sometimes, the younger sister would seek some slightly intimate contact-- Although Kyousuke was not totally unconcerned, he felt that he had a clean conscience.

Putting aside Renko who seemed to have a huge problem with it, Kyousuke asked the lady-in-waiting at the doorway.

"By the way, what about Eiri? Is she still sleeping?"

The lady-in-waiting shook her head behind the Noh mask and said in a business-like manner:

"No. I have already gone to call her just now. She should be coming presently."

"...I see. Then how about we get freshened up?"

"Yes!? Renko-san, you go and do those radio calisthenics first, okay?"

--Thirty minutes passed.

"......She's still not here."

"That's for sure. What is she doing?"

"One, two, three? Four!"

Kyousuke and Ayaka had just brushed their teeth, freshened up and changed. Renko's radio calisthenics had reached the fifth round but there were still no signs of Eiri showing up. Was she spending time making herself presentable...?

Returning after putting away the futons, the lady-in-waiting glanced once around the room and spoke:

"Eh, so Eiri-sama has not arrived yet...? She probably went back to sleep. I shall go call her again."

"WAIT!"

Renko stopped her calisthenics and called to the lady-in-waiting who was about to leave.

"Answer me, are you heading to Eiri's room now?"

"Yes, you are correct."

"Then please please please! Take me along, okay?"

"Don't make things difficult for others. Besides, wouldn't Eiri really hate that--?"

"Me too, me too, me too? Yes, Ayaka wants to go too! Let's go call Eiri-san to wake up!?"

Ayaka interrupted Kyousuke and concurred with Renko's request.

The lady-in-waiting simply agreed.

"As you wish. Then I shall lead the way."

"Hey hey..."

The lady-in-waiting started walking with Renko and Ayaka following in glee.

Too late to call them to stand still, Kyousuke was left behind, scratching his head.

"...Sheesh. Don't blame me if you get scolded, 'kay?"

He muttered to himself before running off to chase Renko and Ayaka.

By the way, Kyousuke was going along to supervise those two and prevent them from going out of control, rather than out of curiosity about what Eiri's--a girl's--room was like.

"You two listen carefully. Don't do anything weird after entering the room, okay?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Not really."

"Foosh--Nothing to worry about. Right, Ayaka-chan?"

"That's right. We just want to know in detail how messy the room is, what style the furnishings are, and whether there are suspicious or embarrassing things."

"P-Please, I'm begging you to behave..."

...Once Ayaka begins checking, nothing escaped her.

In the past, Kyousuke's gravure magazine, hidden in a spot he was convinced was safe, was discovered in an instant--

'How's this for your *side dish* tonight, Onii-chan?'

In this manner, he was scared pale as a ghost when he saw the magazine on the dining table. As luck would have it, their parents were home that night too. Kyousuke did not even want to recall what tragedy happened that night, filing it away as the "It's the busy gravure idol's fault that I had no side dishes for dinner that night" incident.

One of the few incurable cases of Kyousuke's mental trauma.

While he was suffering from these past memories, they reached a place quite far from the guest room. The group arrived at a corner of the main house, much more luxurious than the secondary residence.

"We have arrived."

In front of the tightly shut entrance, Kyousuke and company stopped. The room was silent. They could not hear the slightest sound coming from inside. Most likely, Eiri was still asleep...

Renko pressed her ear against the sliding door and made an "all OK" sign to Ayaka who was standing by the side. Ayaka then responded with a "roger that" and they looked at Kyousuke together.

They seemed to be seeking his permission.

Kyousuke closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

--"Charge."

He nodded, moved his thumb and pointed at the room.

Renko and Ayaka were standing by on the left and right respectively. They opened the door as soon as they received the order. In the next instant, a certain scene entered Kyousuke's view--

A different dimension.

It was a fantasy realm filled with colors of white and pink.

" " "........." " "

Someone froze as soon as they entered--Renko and Ayaka. Standing in the middle of the opened sliding door, becoming the matter-of-fact commander, Kyousuke had his arms crossed. His widely gaping mouth unable to close.

This scene before his eyes was a Japanese room that had been decorated in western style. The floor was covered by a carpet of pure white while the walls had pink wallpaper.

Furniture such as the table or cabinets were all uniform in color, decorated with cute accessories and cartoon characters. As for the roof, even the chandeliers were of a glittering style.

The room was filled with a dizzyingly sweet smell. In the corner of this princess-like room--

"...Zzz... Zzz..."

Light nasal breathing noises were coming from the canopy bed but the view was obscured by curtains of white lace. Although the view was unclear, the target was definitely there beyond a doubt.

" " "------" " "

Kyousuke and the others exchanged glances silently then tip-toed over.

Leading the way, Renko grabbed a curtain and slowly lifted it.

"...Shuko.. Shuko... Hmm..."

Their guess turned out to be correct. Dressed in pajamas, Eiri was sleeping there.

Unaware of Kyousuke and the others trespassing, she was breathing peacefully.

She was also hugging a giant teddy bear in her arms.

"...Poseur."

Ayaka mocked first thing as soon as she saw the scene.

From the side, Eiri was hugging a stuffed toy almost the size of a child, totally in deep slumber. Renko aimed a careful poke at her cheek but Eiri did not wake up. Even when her face was slapped, she did not get up.

She did not wake despite getting her face pinched this way and that. There was no reaction no matter what.

"Shuko-- ...Looks like she's fast asleep."

"...Yeah. By the way, is she really Eiri? Could it be someone who looks very similar?"

"Hmm, it occurred to me too. Could this be a twin sister or something..."

Kyousuke and Renko had their faces in a row, looking at the creature who resembled Eiri.

Long lashes on her eyelids. Rust-red strands of hair sticking to her face.

Her lips half-parted, transparent drool hanging on the side of her mouth. Her face was pressed tightly against the teddy bear's face while her arms hugged desperately.

Probably moved out of place while she was sleeping, even the hem of her negligee had curled up, exposing her beautiful thighs. The sheerness of the negligee's fabric added more fuel to the fire, almost exposing a number of places.

Eiri would never allow herself to be seen like this when awake. Currently, she was completely unguarded and vulnerable.

"U-Umm... Are we going to wake her... up?"

"Feels like she'll kill us on the spot."

"Y-You're right... Let's pretend we saw nothing and retreat?"

"Let's do that! We saw nothing, dunno anything. Eiri's room doesn't exist. Let's leave the rest to the servants and leave immediately--"

"RISE AND SHINE, EIRI-SAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!"

Pushing aside the aside the fearful Kyousuke and Renko, Ayaka yelled as loud as she could.

"......Hmm... mmm...?"

Yelled madly in the ear by someone, Eiri moved slightly.

"What the fuck are you doing? Won't that wake her up!? It's super dangerous, can you stop acting so reckless!?"

"Yeah, damn straight, we're dead meat now! Let's run, okay!? Hey, let's run now!?"

Even when Kyousuke and Renko told her to stop, Ayaka ignored them completely.

Shaking Eiri by the shoulders, she yelled even harder.

"The sun is up, it's already morning, you know~~~~!? How much longer are you going to sleep!? Hurry and get up, rise and shine, time to get out of beeeeeeeeeeeed!"

However, Eiri refused to get up. She frowned, went "nnnnnnnnn~~~~" and hugged the stuffed toy tightly.

Kyousuke could hear the sound of something breaking Ayaka's temple.

She aimed for the teddy bear's soft arm, grabbing it with both hands to pull violently--

"Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy, stop being so annoying! Didn't I tell you to get uuuuuuuuuuuuup!?"

Ayaka began to pull with brute force. Eiri resisted in the beginning, but in her state of partial consciousness, the stuffed toy gradually slipped from her grasp and was finally stolen away.

Then *it* happened the next instant.

"...Puutaro?"

Eiri's eyelids opened slightly. Opening her eyes, wiping drool from the side of her mouth, she then noticed the disappearance of the teddy bear in her hands. Immediately, her countenance changed in alarm.

She sat up forcefully and started to scan the bed where she slept--

"Puutaro!? Where did you go, Puutaro!? Answer me, Puuta--"

" " "------" " "

When she saw Kyousuke and the others standing there, stunned on the spot, she instantly froze.

The color of blood faded from Eiri's face, turning from pale to ghastly white.

"Wha... W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-Wha..."

Her lips fluttered while a flood of red gradually rushed up from below...

"Ugyaaaaaaah! You lot, why are you here!?"

Eiri's entire face had turned bright red. In the next instantly, she screamed shrilly.

Hugging her pillow, retreating to her bed's edge, she shifted her gaze rapidly--

"Eh, no... n-n-n-n-no way, how could this happen!? How could these guys appear in my room!? Too weird, way too weird, h-h-h-how... Wait. Give me some time, please! I need to think, think... How did this happen, how did this happen, what is going on!? Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Meanwhile, Kyousuke, Renko and Ayaka had their own surprises to handle.

Staring at Eiri who was in a desperate struggle, hugging her pillow, they discussed--

"...Puutaro? So this bear is named as that kind of character?"[4]

"Probably not, it's should be just the teddy bear's name. Eiri-san probably named it herself, right?"

"Ehhhh!? I can't believe you named your stuffed toy... How old are you now?"

"Oooooooh... Stop that! Quit staring at me like that!"

Eiri looked like she wanted to escape their gaze, burying her face into her pillow.

"Oh? You seem to like it a lot, this Puutaro... Hugging it while you sleep."

"Such a poseur. But it's true, it's very comfy hugging something soft and fluffy... Soft and fluffy."

"Arghhh, so unfair! Let me have a hug too!"

"Hey... What are you guys doing without permission!? Give my Puutaro back!"

"Hyah!?"

Eiri looked up with murderous intent and snatched Puutaro from Ayaka's hands. Having regained it successfully, she returned Puutaro to its former position and hugged it tightly.

"...So violent," said Ayaka with a scowl.

"You like to hog things too much, Eiri-san. You acted like an angry lion whose meat was stolen just now, you know? How much do you like this thing, this Puutaro?"

"S-Shut up!"

Blushing to her ears, Eiri tightened her embrace and glared at Ayaka.

"Yeah, I love Puutaro! Without him, I can't sleep well! Sorry for being so childish, okay!? It's my fault for being a poseur, 'kay!? Yeah yeah, I'm to blame, I'm always to blame... So how does liking a stuffed toy offend others!? Like it matters, who cares!? It's very cute, got a problem with that!? What now? Entering someone's room without permission and laughing at others, what the hell do you want!? Just go die already!"

Eiri roared and screamed wildly, her eyes completely open.

Her eyelids, usually half-closed, showed no signs of drooping at all. In other words, Eiri always looked so drowsy at school was because she did not have this stuffed toy in the dorms...?

"...I really wanna die."

Inside this, decorated in whites and pinks mostly...

Eiri was weeping with her face buried in Puutaro's chest while Kyousuke and the others watched her silently without saying a word.

× × ×

"...Argh, so annoying, this is the worst. The absolute worst."

At the dining table in the great hall, Eiri was grumbling with extreme displeasure, having changed into casual clothing. Multi-grain rice, light pickles, roast fish, miso soup, side dishes--Breakfast was laid out on the table but she showed no signs of moving her chopsticks.

Ever since taking her seat, she had remained in depression, clutching her head.

"I knew I'd get teased, that's why I wanted to hide it... How did this happen? Why did you come over just to wake me up? Ahhhhhhh... I wanna disappear. Really wanna disappear~~~~~~~~!"

Eiri squirmed in suffering. Seeing that, Kyousuke smiled wryly.

While stirring his natto, he offered comforting words to her.

"Actually, you don't need to be so depressed. That stuffed toy is very cute. Same for the room's style, it's very girl. Personally, I find it very okay."

"Ehhhhh-- ...Really?"

Ayaka immediately reacted as soon as Kyousuke tried to console Eiri.

Staring at her notebook on the table, Ayaka began to read out a list.

"A giant teddy bear, one meter tall, heart-shaped cushions, strawberry alarm clock, flower-shaped indirect lighting, glittering jewelry box, assorted junk food, a pile of shoujo manga on the bookshelves--"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh... I'm not hearing anything--"

Eiri covered her ears with her hands.

"...It's really all sorts after adding it all up. Going way overboard with girliness. Sickeningly sweet, it's sweet to the point of causing heartburn. Ayaka personally thinks it's terrible and not okay! What do you think, Renko-san?"

"Eh, me? W-Well... Actually, it's not bad. Yeah."

Renko answered in hesitation then slurped on her jelly drink.

Kyousuke expected her to make a big deal out of Eiri's girlish hobbies but did not expect such an ordinary response of embarrassment.

No matter how insensitive, Renko still knew that she could not make fun of this topic lightly. Renko's response made Eiri feel even more embarrassed, her entire body struggling.

"Stop it! Don't you go trying to comfort me too, okay!? You should be giggling and teasing me at this point, right? Why are you seriously trying to be considerate for me... No no no no! This makes me feel even worse. S-Stop this... Please, give me a break..."

"...What's there to be ashamed of, Nee-san?"

Kagura had been eating silently. At this moment, she remarked in disagreement.

Kagura shot a look of disdain at the listless Eiri.

"Your girly hobbies are nothing new, right? Didn't Nii-sama and the others mock you all day long in the past?"

"Huh?"

The attack out of the blue caused Eiri to look up swiftly.

Kagura gracefully ate rice while speaking:

"Not satisfied with just remodeling your room, you even changed the way you were dressing back then, right? Personally, I don't get what you were thinking, what Gothic & Lolita... Something like that? I remember you used to wear dresses with a lot of lace, making yourself stand out bizarrely. Holding an umbrella even when it's not raining... Incomprehensible tastes. You don't wear those anymore, do you, Nee-san?"

"Wha--"

Eiri's eyes widened greatly. Kyousuke and the others all looked at her.

...Going Gothic Lolita in a pure Japanese-style home? Although it probably looked good with her appearance, no doubt about it, the image would clash severely with the environment. Kyousuke imagined her looking very out of place in this home.

At this moment, Ayaka muttered to herself: "Now that you mention it, the closet might be packed with different styles..."

"Like frilly dresses, pannier skirts, garter belts... headdresses and bonnets, or even cat-eared headbands!"

"That's right. It would've been fine if she wore it for her own satisfaction, but I can't believe she forcibly dressed me up too... Sweet Lolita, was that what it's called? Made me look totally like a baby when she was done, and even took a ton of pictures. I still remember all this clearly even now. There is no greater humiliation..."

Clenching chopsticks, Kagura's hand began to shake.

Eiri went "Huh!?" and scowled.

"You call it humiliation...? You were clearly the one who insisted on wearing it, okay!? 'So unfair, only Nee-san gets to wear cute clothes' 'Kagura wants to dress up too~' You even said stuff like that."

"Wha--"

This time, it was Kagura's turn to become speechless.

"D-Don't make up rumors! I don't remember anything like that. Don't fabricate the past, okay!?"

Kagura put down her chopsticks and looked at Eiri.

"Just you try and make fun of me again. Watch out or I'll reveal the fact that you used write romance novels while imagining yourself as the protagonist."

"What do you mean, watch out...!? Didn't you just reveal it!?"

Eiri slammed her palm on the table and began to face off against Kagura.

"Now you're making me mad! Treating me like an idiot all day long... Didn't you use to be a weak crybaby, always calling "Nee-saa~n?" with snot running, following me around everywhere!? I don't want to get criticized by someone like that."

"Who had snot running!? L-Lies... And look who's talking, the one who went "I'm too scared to sleep alone" at night after watching a horror show and got into someone else's bed?"

"Oh, that. I recall that being you, Kagura, not me, you know? But I was totally not scared of those horror stories. You're the one who woke me up in the middle of the night saying you're 'too scared to go to the toilet alone' which was why I had to escort you, right? What nerve you have to bring it up."

"Guh--"

Kagura's forcefulness instantly weakened. Words were stuck in her mouth. Her cheeks were bright red while her eyebrows shot up. She looked quite childish as befitted her age.

Next, the twins sitting next to Kagura, eating breakfast, looked at each other--

"Speaking of which, Kagura-oneechan used to love Eiri-oneechan a lot, right, Ran-chan?"

"Seems like it, Ryou-kun, though memories are hard to come by. Feels so hard to imagine!"

"Yeah, so hard to imagine. So surprising, Ran-chan."

"Yup. It's really surprising, Ryou-kun!"

"I don't love her at all."

While the twins were filling in with their imaginations, Kagura threw them a look of disdain.

Also, Fuyou was apparently absent from home, having gone out early in the morning to receive her eldest son who was back from a job. With no one to talk to, Busujima ate breakfast silently the whole time.

No one could step out to defuse the situation.

"Hmph... Who would love someone like Nee-san. What a shameful past."

Kagura griped with resentment and started eating again.

Watching her drink miso soup with a scowl, Ayaka laughed.

"Say, trash Kagura, you're actually a tsundere? You totally look like you're just acting shy."

"I'm not acting shy. Shut your stupid trap, shitty Ayaka."

Ayaka and Kagura were adding unnecessary titles to each other's names. They seemed like they hated each other but it felt different from how Kagura confronted Eiri.

Despite her sharp and merciless tongue, Kagura would look very lively when recounting past experiences with Eiri, giving off an impression like she enjoyed it. Perhaps she hated Eiri currently, but Kyousuke could not shake off the feeling and imagine the sisters getting along intimately in the past--Thus, their interactions brought a smile to his face.

"...What the heck, you're staring at other people's faces and laughing now?"

"No, it's nothing."

"...Tsk. All of you are the same."

Kagura clicked her tongue and chewed light pickles hard.

Confronted with Kagura who was sulking on her own, Kyousuke struck up conversation with her.

"By the way, there's something that's been on my mind... What were Eiri's past novels about roughly?"

"Hmm-- Kyousuke... It seems like you really want to die?"

As soon as Kyousuke brought up the past, Eiri's aura screamed bloody murder. Instantly, Kagura put down her chopsticks as though replying "good question" and started to talk smugly.

"Oh, you're asking about Nee-san's maiden work? The title was very direct, 'The Assassin's Love.' It featured an ordinary young man who was the target and Nee-san as the assassin, weaving a tale of forbidden love--"

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"......Unforgivable."

After bringing up various anecdotes without hesitation, ones which made Eiri want to smash her head into the wall out of shame, Kagura escaped with a face of satisfaction--

Sprawled over the table that had been cleared away, Eiri snarled viciously.

"You're absolutely going to pay for this, Kyousuke."

"Me?"

"...Who else?"

Eiri's chin was on the table while she glared back at him in disdain.

"I wouldn't have to suffer such humiliation if you hadn't thrown that topic to her without thinking... Stop doing unnecessary things, you idiot. Just go die already."

Kyousuke was sipping barley tea on the side, relaxing, when he was suddenly scared by her resentful gaze.

"S-Sorry... But the story was well-written! Eiri had already committed her resolve, unable to bring herself to kill the target, in the end, she tearfully confessed her feelings..."

"Yeah yeah! 'Before I could kill you, you already got me in the heart (wry smile)' is such a good line, like genius-level sense or something."

"And the guy replied 'Not at all, I'm the one who got done in a long time ago by you. The first time I saw you, my heart was instantly stolen (radiant smile).' This line is unbeatable too."

"......."

Kyousuke's comment brought Renko and Ayaka to join in with their praise.

The corners of Eiri's eyes glinted with tears.

"Kyousuke~~~~~!?"

"S-Sorry... I picked the wrong method to make up."

He had put Kagura on the spot earlier because he wanted to see Kagura reminisce about the past with Eiri--but ended up stepping on a massive landmine by accident.

He had not expected to dig up such embarrassing and shameful memories...

Apart from Eiri's maiden work, Kagura also revealed a whole ton of past events, almost laying bare Eiri's entire life.

With her face against the table, Eiri's entire body lacked strength.

"...Sigh. What a disaster today."

Eiri muttered to herself then pushed herself to sit up.

After stretching on the spot, she stood up.

"Next, I will pay my respects at a grave... What plans do you guys have?"

"Us? Lemme think--"

"Another adventure in Eiri-san's room, Ayaka wants to dig for treasure!"

"Dig for treasure? Oh, Ayaka-chan, you mean the original manuscript of 'The Assassin's Love'!? Great, I'll go help out too. If we're lucky, we might dig out even more interesting stuff!"

"...Really? Fine. I'll ask the servants to guard my room properly, okay? They'll guard it so securely that not even a bug will be able to enter."

" "Eh--" "

Ayaka and Renko simultaneously exclaimed in disappointment while Eiri clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

"Don't 'eh' me. I'll probably be back in an hour or so. Can't you guys just behave and wait in your room? It'll be such a pain if I have to search the house to find you guys."

" "Eh--" "

"Like I said, don't 'eh' me! Kyousuke, I'm leaving the rest to you, okay?"

"Got it. I'll keep a close eye on these two, so don't worry."

"...Yeah, thanks."

As a side note, the custodial supervisor who was meant to look after them was not present. As soon as he had his fill of breakfast, he had said "I'm going for a walk" and left.

He probably thought he could monitor them secretly without being around by using those poisonous creatures. Anyway, Busujima clearly preferred working alone. Or perhaps he did not quite like the company of others.

"--Hmm."

At this moment, Eiri's aura suddenly changed.

The twins, originally playing in the courtyard, chasing butterflies all over the place, stopped moving at this time.

The shishi-odoshi tilted from the weight of water and produced a refreshing knocking sound.

"I'm home."

In the next second, a man showed up.

He was dressed in a scarlet hakama with a rouge haori. A young man in his latter teens. His hair was red and black with highlights with the right side braided. He had silver ear piercings while his haori was fastened with a silver chain.

With a face as handsome as a model's, he was smiling faintly.

"......Nii-san."

" "Basara-oniichan!" "

Eiri whispered softly while the twins ran towards him.

The man dressed in the scarlet hakama--Basara--rubbed the heads of his younger siblings in turn and said:

"It's been four days. How are you doing, you two?"

" "Great!" "

"Haha. Your responses are so in sync."

He narrowed his copper-colored eyes and gazed towards Eiri.

Instantly, Basara's smile vanished.

He moved his hand away from Ran's head and walked towards Eiri--

"Looky who's here, Eiri... In your case, it's been half a year, right? It feels like you've changed. Just slightly... Allow me to confirm, okay!?"

He entered the room and suddenly accelerated while kicking the tatami floor.

Basara spread his arms and jumped over--

"Sorry but I must decline."

Eiri swiftly dodged.

Basara's arms only caught air, crossing before his chest in an empty embrace.

"...Tsk. What a heartless little sister. It's not like a hug would cost you an arm or a leg."

"Ew. Nii-san, your perfume is too smelly."

"Eh. No way, are you for real? (sniff sniff)."

Taken by surprise, Basara widened his eyes and started to smell himself.

"To me, this amount only results in a faint fragrance... Also, this isn't perfume but incense, you know? For relaxing. Isn't this fragrance refreshing?"

"...Not at all. You're gaudy as always, Nii-san."

"As for you, cold as ever. However--"

Basara stopped talking and crossed his arms before his chest. He started to examine Eiri from head to foot.

Rubbing his chin and narrowing his eyes--

"You haven't changed at all. Still a hottie, yeah?"

"...What are you staring at?"

"Legs. The thighs."

"Don't give such a vulgar answer, okay?"

"Not really, it's... that, right? The hot pants you're wearing are saying 'look at me now.' Wouldn't it be weird to tell me to 'quit staring'?"

"Huh?"

"Isn't this a classic example of *that*? Despite clearly wanting others to look, but too shy to ask directly, that's why you're hinting with your clothing instead of speaking out, right? What a shy tsundere little sister!"

"...Are you trying to piss me off, Nii-san?"

"I want to lick you."

"Just go die already."

Eiri scolded him then immediately turned her face to one side.

Basara closed his eyes, clapped his hands together and replied "Thank you for my first treat of 'just go die already' today." When he opened his eyes again, he looked at Kyousuke's group instead of Eiri.

"...By the way, these guys are the guests mentioned earlier, right? Hmm? Hmm? I get it. This is really--"

Kyousuke, Ayaka, Renko... Basara's gaze wandered across them, looking at them in turn.

His gaze suddenly stopped when he reached Renko.

"------"

The expression on his face disappeared. Narrowing one eye, he observed and said:

"......You're in the business, aren't you?"

To think he discerned it with one look.

" "Eh?" " The Kamiya siblings were shocked. Renko smiled with a "foosh" and asked Basara.

"Oh? How can you tell?"

"How? Hmph... That kind of thing can be seen from a glance. Someone on my level of power can see through everything with one look. Even as a rough count, at least three digits... How scary for you to have such achievements under your belt at this young age. It's really rare for me to see amazing kids like you. My blood hasn't boiled like this for so long."

"Wha...!?"

--This man could even read the number of Renko's victims?

Kyousuke was terrified but the best part had yet to come.

"As for why you're wearing a mask, it's actually simple... That gas mask isn't some kind of weird image you're going for. It's to hide your face--Your true identity, right? However, what a shame... I've seen through it. I've seen through everything."

Basara smiled arrogantly.

Staring intently at Renko--

"Indeed, you're no amateur... Instead, you're a gravure idol who's hiding her face with a mask!"

" " " "------" " " "

Subtle silence descended after Basara made his declaration.

The shishi-odoshi made a funny sound.

"...Nii-san? What rubbish are you pulling out of your ass?"

Eiri's face was red from embarrassment, her shoulders trembling with rage while she questioned him.

Basara went "hmph" and swept his hand through his hair, replying smugly:

"What am I talking about? This girl's true identity. No matter how well she hides it, I can tell just from this pair of massive jugs. Her bust measurement probably approaches three digits. With a giant rack like this--no, exploding tits like these--how could such a girl be an amateur!? Despite being middle or high school, this growth rate is unbelievable!"

"Wrong, Nii-san. What's unbelievable is--Your brain."

Eiri pressed her hand to her forehead as though enduring a migraine.

Renko sighed "shuko--..." and lifted up that magnificent bust.

"Sorry but I'm not a gravure idol, okay? I'm just a nobody with a beautiful giant boobs."

"What did... you say?"

Basara stumbled with surprise on his face.

He stared at Renko's giant boobs whose presence had been lifted and emphasized--

"An amateur despite such huge breasts... huh? Hey, are you kidding me, Dynamic Honey? It's a totally different level compared to my Eiri. T-Truly unbelievable... And *beautiful* giant boobs to boot!? But no, I won't be convinced by empty words, I have to confirm with my own eyes--"

"Wait."

"Owwwwwwww!?"

Basara leaned over with restless hands but Eiri twisted his ear.

"It hurts, yo!? Don't think you can stop Onii-chan!"

"I'm already stopping you, please show some common sense, okay? Are you retarded? If you move, my hand will slip and my nails will slice your ear open."

"......Got~ it."

Basara reluctantly gave up on resisting.

Eiri clicked her tongue and took her hand from the base of Basara's ear.

"What a hopeless pervert... Extending your filthy hands towards anyone you meet without a second's warning. You really need to mend your ways, okay?"

"How rude! I'm only interested in chicks who're hot enough. And what extending my filthy hands? I didn't even expose a fingernail. By the way, I'll have you know that I'm not a pedophile, okay? No matter how cute they are, if a girl is like Ran or that girl there who hasn't even gone through puberty, I'd rather die than lust after them!"

Pointing at Ayaka, Basara defended himself with an explanation that did not quite clear his name.

Ayaka's expression instantly vanished. Her dark pupils showed no light at all.

"This guy is really irritating... You said you'd rather die than have lust, so you wanna die?"

"Hey hey, stop saying something so dangerous! Control yourself, Ayaka."

Ayaka had grabbed an empty glass and was just about to stand up when Kyousuke frantically stopped her.

"--By the way," said Basara, looking at Kyousuke.

"It's such a rare sight to see Eiri bring a boy back home. Probably the first time ever? I can't believe she's made friends with guys outside of the family. How far have you two progressed?"

"...What do you mean by progressed?"

"Do you even need to ask? Of course, I'm talking about kissing, skinship and having s--"

"Just go die already."

Accompanied by a sound, a right hand swung over at the same time. Basara dodged in the nick of time.

"What a close call! My head would've been blown away, yeah!?"

"Who asked you to talk rubbish!?"

Eiri went red in the face and held her nails against her chest.

"What k-kissing, skinship... Kyousuke and I don't have that kind of relationship! We're just ordinary classmates! W-W-W-Who, who would want to do that with this kind of pervert..."

"...Pervert? Oh really? So he has special fetishes."

"No."

Kyousuke felt quite distraught by Basara gazing at him as though they were kindred spirits.

"Hmm... Fine, whatever. Let's leave the details for lunch. I just got back from a mission, so I'm tired."

Saying that, Basara yawned.

Needless to say, it was obvious what Basara meant by mission.

Eiri's expression distorted slightly. Basara grinned and said:

"Hey you, if only you'd grow up sooner--Rusty Nail?"

For just an instant, he showed quite a sadistic expression while whispering softly.

Basara slipped past the silent Eiri and moved towards the veranda.

"Bye now, okay? Let's chat later. Sorry for the late introductions, but I'm the Akabane main family's eldest son--Akabane Basara. Age eighteen. I currently have a girlfriend but I'm still looking for more. I hope to have as much fun with you all as I do with Eiri... Killers in training. Anyway, I'm off to bed for now."

Basara greeted without expecting an answer then waved his hand, leaving with a smile.

" "Basara-oniichan, Basara-oniichan!" "

The twins chased after Basara and started to ask in a frenzy.

"How many did you kill this time?" "How many blades did you use?"

"A total of ten including the bodyguards. One per person, so exactly ten."

"Were they strong?" "Were they weak?"

"I don't need to answer that, right?"

"How many girlfriends have you had?" "More than your kill count? Or less?"

"Secret."

" "Eh--Tell me!" "

All sorts of questions. The twins were driven by exuberant curiosity. Basara answered fluently.

It sounded like ordinary chatting on the surface, but many of the topics were actually quite bloody. Essentially, assassination was everyday life for the Akabane family. Perhaps this was their "normal."

"......"

Even when the noisy trio had gone out of earshot, Eiri was still biting her lip hard the whole time.

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The grounds of the Akabane main residence was very vast.

The flat land used to built the mansion went without saying, but even a number of mountains were included. The land was completely privately owned and forbidden to unauthorized entry.

They had virtually no interactions with the inhabitants at the foot of the mountain. Only a select number such as the family doctor and private tutors were given permission to enter the mansion.

Apart from that, none of the people unrelated to the dark side of society were privy to the Akabane family's true origins. The Akabane family did not engage in "outward deception." As people of two worlds, their lives simply never intersected.

Members of the Akabane family killed for a living. Hence, they judged and handled many matters through the lens of "to kill" or "not to kill."

And the one holding all this authority was--

"Okaa-sama always seems so calm and gentle... But actually, she's completely merciless when she strikes, you know? Thoroughly wiping out any existence harmful to the Akabane, she will mercilessly kill anyone, no matter who, as long as it is beneficial to the Akabane."

--Akabane Fuyou. Eiri's mother as well as the Akabane main family's 29th head.

Perhaps because her authority was too great, whenever Eiri spoke of her, Eiri's tone of voice carried more fear and reverence than familial affection towards her mother.

They were leaving the secondary residence, passing through the veranda and moving towards the main house. After paying respects at a grave, Eiri was leading Kyousuke on a tour of the mansion while explaining certain things.

She covered the environment where she had grown up in as well as various trivia on the family.

"In my view, guessing Okaa-sama's thoughts is impossible. Her expression and attitude never changes. No way to read emotions... This is what's frightening. Like when I failed my jobs, her reaction was the same. I had clearly gone several times yet failed to kill anyone, but all she said each time was 'oh dear, what am I going to do with this child' while smiling wryly in a carefree manner... However, when I failed for the sixth time, Okaa-sama did not do anything. She left me alone just like that, so I've always believed she gave up on me... Yet she made this move. Suddenly summoning me home and welcoming me as though nothing had happened... Seriously, I've no idea what are her intentions."

Murmuring quietly, Eiri looked very gloomy. After encountering Basara then returning from her visit to a grave, Eiri had been acting this way the whole time.

To Eiri, her ancestral home was probably not a comfortable place. Perhaps after separating from Kyousuke and the others, spending time alone in her own troubled thoughts, she might have gotten herself into an impasse.

Kyousuke went over to Eiri who was leading the way and walked alongside her--

"If you've no idea, why not try asking her directly? I don't think she's the type that's impossible to communicate with, right?"

"......Sigh, you're not wrong."

Eiri made a bitter expression.

Wrapping hair around her index finger and fidgeting, Eiri answered with a reluctant attitude.

"I'm not very good at dealing with Okaa-sama... Ever since I was young, she had held me to high standards through extreme methods in the name of 'raising' an assassin. It was always training, training, training, training no matter whether I was sleeping or awake, working me until I passed out, heaping further hardship upon me when I woke up again. Throwing me alone deep in the mountains, tying a block of lead to me then tossing me into a waterfall, attacking me with a rain of blades, unleashing ferocious beasts to attack me, putting weird restraints on me, forcing me to survive under such circumstances... The school's lessons are nothing in comparison to my super Spartan education. I was on the verge of death not just once or twice."

"...Are you serious? That's not education but abuse."

"Yeah. Okaa-sama explained it as 'I have to make you live with death by your side to prevent you from getting killed by others later on' but who knows what the truth is... It'd be fine if her attitude was merciless like Kurumiya's, but the calmness makes her even more terrifying."

"Y-You're right about that..."

An unpleasant contrast. Kyousuke could understand why Eiri found her mother hard to deal with.

The way she kept ulterior motives bottled inside, she was definitely quite a preposterous mother.

"--However, Otou-sama was different."

Eiri spoke softly and the corners of her mouth eased.

Her voice was very gentle, carrying a tone color that Kyousuke had never heard before.

"His gaze was very sharp and his expression was quite stern. He looked like he was always angry. Normally silent and speaking little, he was very loud when yelling at people. Every time he scolded me, I was so scared I couldn't move at all. The complete opposite of Okaa-sama, he was a very stern person with a fiery temper. However..."

Her voice conveyed loneliness and nostalgia.

With deep love in her voice, Eiri continued.

"He was a very kind person. Due to work, he was often away from home, but whenever I was crying or disheartened, he would silently stroke my head and accompany me the whole time. He even took me outside behind Okaa-sama's back."

"...What a great father."

"Yeah. I'm told that he originally worked in the bodyguard business, completely unrelated to the Akabane, so his values were different too... I felt secure just by having Otou-sama by my side. Otou-sama's hands were very big and felt very solid to the touch. Even now I can still remember clearly--"

Saying that, Eiri stared at her own palm.

Sadness surfaced in her eyes.

"...I remember everything."

Then repeating herself in an almost inaudible voice, she lowered her head.

"Eiri...?"

Kyousuke turned his head to look at Eiri who had stopped walking. Following them, Renko and Ayaka caught up and peered at Eiri's face.

"Oh dear, are you okay? If you wanna cry, I can lend you my large bosom."

"Eiri-san, so you actually have a father complex... You need to let go of the past."

"S-Shut up!"

Eiri started walking as though trying to get away from Renko and Ayaka's hassling then reached out to pat her cheeks with her hands.

"I'm totally fine. It's nothing. I'm just a bit sentimental since it's been so long since I last made a grave visit... There's nothing to worry about."

Eiri spat out her words then walked to overtake Kyousuke.

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Kyousuke caught a glance of the side of her face, which seemed to be tensed with displeasure.

"...Really? In that case, just let it be."

"Shuko-- ...You don't need my massive bust anymore? What a shame."

"Ayaka's turn, Ayaka's turn, Ayaka will take Eiri-san's place... Take that! Rub rub rub rub."

"Hyah!? A-Ayaka-chan... You're making it hard for me to walk. Let go now--Hyau!?"

"Hehehe. What a pair of top-class giant boobs, so big and sensitive. Feel that? Does it feel good? Do you feel good!?"

"What are you playing around as girls, you two..."

Ending their conversation about Eiri's father, Kyousuke chased after Eiri's pace.

However, when he passed by a certain Japanese-style room--

".........Hmm?"

Kyousuke stopped again.

"Hey. Shouldn't we go in here to have a look?"

It was a room that resembled a Buddhist temple hall.

The sliding door was open. The interior was the size of eight tatami mats. The faint scent of incense was hanging in the air inside. An offering table was set up before the Buddhist altar with fruits and vegetables as well as other objects such as Chinese lantern plants.

The offering table was an altar for welcoming the souls of ancestors, which included Eiri's father, of course, that would be present during the Bon

Festival--At least, that was the belief. In that case, Eiri should be paying her respects here rather than the grave.

"......"

For a few short seconds, Eiri's gaze wandered while she hesitated to speak--

"--Same difference? I've already visited."

She answered indifferently then walked away.

"...I see."

Nodding, Kyousuke continued walking. He looked at the offering table when passing by the door.

Like the breakfast they had eaten this morning, food was placed on vermilion plates as offerings on the table. The food, which had gone cold, was left untouched. Kyousuke looked at the offerings to the ancestors then at the back of Eiri's gradually receding figure before sighing. Kyousuke felt something instinctively.

Eiri had claimed to have visited already.

That was probably a lie--

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After a tour of the main house, Kyousuke and company went through the entryway to go outside.

The land surrounded by the tall stone walls was very vast. Outside the mansion, there were storage buildings such as barns and earthen warehouses and even various facilities such as tea houses or shrines all over the place.

Among these facilities, the most frequently used by the Akabane family was the martial arts dojo.

Built near the main house, the dojo had handwashing and toilet facilities in front. A stone paved path extended across the ground of red gravel.

Just as this scenery came into view when they were passing through a bamboo forest, Eiri instantly murmured quietly:

"...Someone seems to be there. Is it Kagura?"

In that instant, Eiri seemed to hesitate whether or not to go over to have a look...

"Hyahahhhhh! It's water, water!"

"The water is so cold!?"

"Hey!?"

When Eiri stopped suddenly, Renko and Ayaka went past her and competed for a spot at the handwashing station. Seeing them pick up the ladle and splashing water, Eiri felt drained of energy.

"...What are you two doing? The sequence is all wrong."

Eiri took the ladle from Renko's hand and filled it with clean water to wash her left hand. Then she switched the ladle to her left and washed her right hand. Then switching hands again, she poured water into her palm, took a quiet sip and rinsed her mouth before spitting the water out. Finally, she returned the ladle to its proper spot with both hands.

Her motions were quite fluid and one could tell she had done it many times already.

"You have to complete it with one ladle of water. Got that?"

"Slurp... Slurp... Slurp... Slurp..."

Eiri had a proud look on her face when she turned her head to take a look. Renko had stuck her straw into the water basin, sucking in water single-mindedly. Next to her, Ayaka was scooping water with both hands to drink.

"...Listen when others are talking to you."

"Uwah, it's so cold! What are you doing, Eiri!?"

"Enough! How can you people be so absurdly lacking in common sense!?"

Eiri splashed cold water on the two girls then returned the ladle with a "...Hmph." After doing that, she left the handwashing station and walked towards the dojo.

Kyousuke simply washed his hands as demonstrated then followed Eiri.

"Wow, this place is crazy huge..."

Soon after, they reached the main entrance. It was a majestic building covered with roof tiles. Naturally, the color was red.

Behind a lattice door, sounds resembling feet against the floor could be heard in addition to yells like "urya!" or "sorya!"

"...It's Ryou and Ran? They're energetic as always."

Eiri smiled wryly and opened the door to enter the dojo.

Then--

"Oh my, it's you guys. Welcome, welcome."

A young man dressed in a scarlet hakama and rouge haori smiled at them in a laid back manner. Kyousuke instantly froze. Next to him, Eiri clicked her tongue.

"So you still haven't slept yet, Nii-san. Why don't you hurry off to bed?"

"Don't be like that. I'd like to sleep earlier, but these two won't let me go..."

--What a pain. He tilted his head, only for a white blade to rush past the side. Ducking to avoid a swinging blade in the nick of time, Basara laughed:

"No helping it. Life as a popular guy sure is tough."

"...Really? In that case, why don't you simply go to sleep right now? I'll have you sleep for eternity."

"Ahaha. Actually, there were a few times when that almost happened. I've stayed up all night and really wanna sleep... Why not give me an injury directly? That'll wake me up."

Basara covered his mouth with his right hand while yawning and tilting his body slightly to one side.

A black blade criss-crossed the location of his arm from a second earlier. Almost simultaneously, a swinging white blade attacked but was in vain, merely slashing Basara's afterimage.

"T-This is..."

"Look, you two. Your attacks are getting sluggish, you know? You won't even be able to hit butterflies if you slash so slowly."

"So annoying. Just die already, Basara-oniichan!"

"Die die die die die die die die die die die, Basara-oniichan!"

" "Go and diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie!" "

"......What are they doing?"

In front of the puzzled Kyousuke and others, in the middle of the dojo, Basara was standing there with a bored face.

The twins were attacking fiercely, trying to cut down Basara while he stood there.

The black and white blades danced in their hands while attacking Basara, producing countless flashes of the blades.

The dual swords held in the twins' hands seemed to be the result of disassembling their shears. The round handles spun while they alternated between forward and reverse grips, switching in a bewildering manner. The twins were also jumping around freely as they pleased.

Due to being twins, their tacit coordination was also quite outstanding. Moving in unison sometimes, attacking independently on other occasions, they sometimes synchronized, sometimes choosing their own timings, the siblings executed slashes while looking out for openings--

"Hey, don't just stand and watch. How about joining in?"

"...No thanks, Nii-san. I'll pass."

"Eh--You're such a cold little sister."

Basara talked shop while continuing to evade, using minimal footwork and turning his body. He looked quite confident and composed.

The twins' swords moved like a tempest but could not even touch Basara's clothing.

--This scene was making the visitors doubt their eyes.

Peering into the interior of the dojo, Renko and Ayaka were no exceptions. The two of them were rooted to the spot in astonishment. Only Eiri looked the same as always, watching family trying to kill family.

"Hey Eiri... What are they doing?"

"Can't you tell by looking?"

"I'm asking because I don't know..."

"They're playing."

"...Huh...?"

"This is commonplace in my family. Real blades are used as leisure equipment. They're just wielding those things for fun. It's the same for both Ryou and Ran, they're not trying to kill their older brother for real. Even if they really wanted to kill him and challenged him, they probably won't be able to succeed, I suppose? The difference in level is too great."

"What a thorough analysis."

Basara showed a toothy grin in response to Eiri then started to take action.

Arching his upper body, he slipped past a gap in the slashing attacks--

"Kyah!?"

"Uwah!?"

Basara lifted his hand, reached out and touched Ran. Just this motion alone caused the twins to crash together in midair.

Their foreheads knocked together face to face, then they fell down.

Letting go of their weapons, they rolled on the ground in pain.

"Ooooooooooh, it hurts... It really hurts, Ran-chan."

"I'm in pain too, Ryou-kun... Ooooooooooh."

"Ahaha! They look identical even in the way they cry out in pain. You two are too in sync, which makes it easy to counter, you know? Again, things were over before you could force me to draw my blade, eh, Ryou? Ran?"

" "Ooooooooooooooh~~~~~~!" "

The twins moaned while glaring at Basara who was smiling smugly.

Basara casually went "hmm" and stretched.

"Crap, I'm so sleep... Super wanna sleep. Onii-chan wants to sleep! So I've got a favor to ask, Eiri--Can you help me get rid of my sleepiness?"

"I refuse. Just go to bed if you want to sleep."

"Oh my, that's true, but it feels a bit incomplete if I go to sleep right now. We haven't seen each other for half a year, you know? As the elder brother, I have to confirm your growth."

"...Nothing much. It's not like there's been a big change."

"Sorry, I'm not talking about breasts--"

"I know."

Eiri replied in displeasure then retorted quietly "...There was clearly growth there." Renko immediately quipped "I doubt that very much."

Eiri went "Huh!?", went red in the face and turned towards her.

"I'm not lying! It grew about a centimeter--"

"Okay, you're dead."

".........!?"

In the next instant, Eiri's body trembled, reacting with extreme surprise.

Kyousuke took a closer look to see that Basara had swung his hand that had been hidden in his kimono's left sleeve. Maintaining a pose as though he had just thrown something, he jeered.

Narrowing one eye, Basara had aimed for Eiri's back--Aiming accurately to pierce the heart from behind.

"You lowered your guard just now, right? Am I wrong? A swordsman could not possibly show his back to the enemy unless he lowered his guard. I was originally wondering if you were trying to bait me with a trick, but don't go dying so quickly."

".........Ah."

Eiri reached her hand to her back.

Then she slowly looked at Basara.

"Getting used to a laid back environment, spending time with a bunch of laid back fellows, receiving a slowpoke education... You've grown sluggish, haven't you, Eiri? Rather than zero growth, you've regressed. Stop making me laugh, Rusty Nail. You don't even have the mettle to kill. If your skills are excluded, what do you have left?"

Getting scolded mercilessly, Eiri bit her lip hard.

--Nothing had stabbed her in the back at all.

Basara had simply gone through the motions of throwing a concealed weapon. He had not actually launched anything.

However, the intent to kill in Basara's gaze and fingertips were genuine.

Had Basara really thrown a weapon, Eiri would have been pierced in the heart through her back and died--That killing intent was enough to make this fact certain, piercing Eiri as a blade's substitute.

"Sheesh. I'm not sure what your skills are like right now, but your mind has definitely lost its edge, Eiri? I'm so disappointed... Ah, what a shame."

Basara put down his hand and sighed. His killing intent gradually dissipated.

He walked towards the entrance where Eiri and the others were.

"Hmm? Yeah. I'm definitely sleepy. I'll sleep till noon... Yawn."

Stretching, Basara passed by Eiri. He put on his wooden clogs and departed deftly. Eiri could not give any reaction on the spot.

"U-Umm... Sorry about just now, okay? But your boobs, umm... Didn't it grow a bit? If it's one centimeter, definitely, yeah."

"That's right! Let alone a centimeter, it could very well be two or even three, isn't that possible!? That kind of flirty guy is full of crap. Ignore him!"

Renko patted Eiri's shoulder to encourage her while Ayaka tried her best to cheer her up.

Simply standing there in a trance with her head lowered, Eiri did not seem like she could hear the two girls.

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"Very well, let the flow begin!"

Inside the garden where red flowers bloomed in abundance, Fuyou's cheerful voice was heard.

Pure white and beautiful as silk, noodles were flowing on a steady water current.

Instantly, these noodles were fished out using crimson chopsticks without any getting away, then placed into amber-colored liquid. After mixing with a sauce containing powdered sesame, scallions, Japanese ginger, raw ginger, the noodles were then lifted out. Just as that person used chopsticks to bring the noodles to her mouth--

"Shuko-- ...The mask is in the way, I can't eat."

Blocked by the pitch-black gas mask, she put down her noodles glumly. Stationed downstream of Renko, Ayaka said "...Then why did you pick up the noodles?" Holding chopsticks, she cast a look of disdain at Renko.

Before them was a section of bamboo, cleaved into half vertically, with transparent and pure water flowing gently. The bamboo was set up at a tilt. At the most upstream spot, Fuyou smiled while holding long chopsticks.

"Please know that we have prepared plenty of noodles. Everyone, eat your fill and enjoy."

The lady-in-waiting was on standby, holding a wooden bucket filled with ice water and lots of plain noodles. Fuyou plucked out noodles from the bucket then placed them into the bamboo flume.

This was known as nagashi-soumen, or "flowing noodles."

"Here, Ayaka-chan. Say ah--"

"Umph! So smooth~~~~"

"Is it good?"

"Yeah, the icy coldness is delicious! It feels very refreshing."

Having plucked out some noodles just now, Renko was now feeding them to Ayaka.

The noodles passed by the two girls who were getting along in harmony, flowing ahead--

"Here I go."

Kyousuke scooped up the noodles. Then--

"For you. Cheer up."

--He placed the noodles into the bowl of Eiri, who was spacing out downstream of him.

Eiri looked up and stared at Kyousuke.

"Sure... T-Thanks."

After thanking, she ate the noodles quietly. The current time was just past noon. Roughly an hour had gone by since the dojo scuffle incident.

Further downstream from the listless Eiri, Kagura snorted and went "...hmph."

"You can't even manage to pick up your own noodles, Nee-san? That playboy is looking down on you because you're like this. How incompetent."

Kagura raised her chopsticks and picked up noodles flowing by, then started eating in agitation.

Basara was not present, apparently sleeping. Ryou and Ran probably found flowing noodles too much trouble and were enjoying the noodles on the veranda by eating normally.

Busujima was waiting at the end of the bamboo flume at the most downstream spot with a bamboo basket.

Under the vast blue sky, Eiri's expression was dark in contrast.

"Sorry for being incompetent..."

"What's the use of apologizing, I can't stand you... Where is your vigor? How much of a disgrace will you make yourself until you're satisfied? What a hopeless idiot."

"......Sorry."

"Like I said, apologizing is useless. Is that word all you're able to say? Putting on that dead look... You can't even withstand a few words from that guy? Nee-san, your mind is too fragile, a disgrace to the Akabane main family. Ahhh, how shameful."

"Hey Kagura--"

"What now?"

Kyousuke interjected, causing Kagura to glare at him.

"Can an outsider not butt into a private conversation between sisters? Also, stop sounding so familiar. I can't believe you're addressing a girl by first name when you've only met recently... It feels just as crass as Basara-niisan. Are you a playboy too?"

"Huh? How could that be possible--"

"Then let me ask you, why are you the only guy here?"

Kagura's voice dropped a few degrees in temperature, cutting Kyousuke's retort off.

"There's Nee-san, gas mask girl and shitty Ayaka... Disregarding the teacher, you're surrounded completely by girls, right? Putting Nee-san aside, the other two are completely devoted to you. Are you trying to make Nee-san lower her guard so that you can eat her up entirely?"

"...Eat her up entirely?"

"That's right. Violate her."

" "Huh!?" "

Kyousuke and Eiri exclaimed in perfect unison.

"R-Rubbish! Something so crazy never crossed my mind, okay!?"

"Vio... late... Come on, stop using such a word so lightly!"

In contrast, Kagura plucked out noodles deftly in utter nonchalance.

"Nee-san... What's there to be so embarrassed about? I simply mentioned the word 'violate.' Your mind is still like an innocent maiden's like before... Clearly it's too ludicrous that you've only grown up in appearance, having seen only kissing in shoujo manga, right?"

Kagura mocked and gracefully ate her noodles.

Daunted, Eiri growled "...ooh."

"Listen carefully, Nee-san. What we call men are actually beasts. Although this guy instantly claimed it never crossed his mind... That's totally lying. He's just paying lip service. Actually, whether sleeping or awake, his mind is filled with dirty thoughts. Looking at your beautiful legs, narrow waist, smooth collarbones, sexy neck, Nee-san, his entire body grows aroused in lust, a lewd beast."

"What lewd beast--"

--Where did she learn such language? Isn't she only thirteen?

Ignoring the shocked Kyousuke, Kagura continued to voice her opinon.

"Whether you end up catering to that beast's pleasure or your body gets defiled, I don't care at all. But please don't taint the Akabane bloodline."

"...I-I know."

"Do you really get it? You've got to do contraception properly."

" "Contraception!?" "

"That's right. Don't do it raw."

"What do you mean, raw..."

"Stuff like creampies would be bad, okay?"

"....Hey hey--"

Stop using overly graphic language... Although involved with the underside of society, she was a member of the workforce after all. Perhaps she was mature in various ways.

Just as Kyousuke was thinking that, Eiri said something surprising.

"H-Hmph... Looks like you've learned a lot of random words in the past six months out of my sight? All the stuff you've been telling me was probably influenced by the so-called 'thin books'."

"--Huh?"

Hearing that term, Kagura's expression instantly changed in alarm.

Plucking out noodles flowing past, Eiri continued hesitantly.

"This morning, I sneaked a peek in your room before visiting the grave... I accidentally discovered them. How should I put it, basically... I found some perverted manga. In terms of content... Hmm. I quietly returned them to their original spot after seeing the cover and the title... S-Sorry, okay?"

"What!?"

The chopsticks fell from Kagura's hand while sauce for her noodles were also spilt.

"Y-You... How dare you ransack my room... Trespassing my room so casually--"

"......Sorry."

Kagura approached Eiri was looking down and avoiding eye contact--

"What was the title of the book you saw?"

"I-I can't say... Slipped my mind."

"What did the cover look like?"

"N-Not sure..."

"Answer now!"

Kagura grabbed Eiri's shoulders. Eiri's gaze wandered.

Kagura lowered her head and forced a faint smile.

"...Really? So it looks like you plan on playing dumb to the very end?"

The rust-red bangs dangled, casting a dark shadow over her eyes.

Kagura's right hand slowly reached for her sash--

"In that case, don't blame me. Which doujinshi exactly did you see... Which book you saw, I will found out even if I need to resort to force-- Nee-san!"

Instantly, Kagura drew out her iron fan.

Chasing after Eiri, who had jumped backwards to retreat, she swung the weapon.

"Wait... Like I said, I don't remember anymore! I-I forgot completely--"

"Liar! Then answer me, why are you acting so embarrassed!?"

"I-I'm not--"

"You'd better not!"

Eiri ducked to dodge an attack. A small tree in the garden was chopped and sent flying in her place.

Kyousuke was ignored on the side while he watched the sisters fight. Were people from the Akabane family incapable of having a meal properly...

Eiri fled while Kagura chased after her.

From a distance, Kyousuke cast a sideways glance at the two girls who seemed to be both playing around and acting seriously. Renko and Ayaka came to his side.

"Foosh--Eiri looks all energized again? Wonderful, wonderful."

"Awww. It wasn't easy giving her time alone with Onii-chan... But someone redundant got in the way. That trash Kagura always sticks to Eiri-san despite grumbling all the time, right?"

Renko sucked noodle sauce through a straw while Ayaka slurped to eat noodles. They were flanking Kyousuke on his left and right respectively. On the veranda side, Ryou and Ran were feeding each other noodles, chatting amicably.

"Good going, Kagura-oneechan. I wanna play with Eiri-oneechan too!"

"Good going, Eiri-oneechan. I wanna play with Kagura-oneechan too!"

"...Let's go over to play with them, Ran-chan?"

"Yeah. Let's go over to play, Ryou-kun!"

" "Waaaaaaaaaaaai!" "

The twins stood up, wielding shears and charging at Eiri and Kagura barefoot.

"Don't interfere! Watch out or I'll shut you guys up first, okay!?"

"W-What a pain... I just want to go back to the noodles--"

" "Ahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!" "

A game of hide-and-seek between sister instantly turned into a chaotic free-for-all within the blink of an eye.

Each of them was swinging a bladed weapon, trying to take out their opponents. Watching the children running around in the garden, Fuyou continued to release noodles and smiled "ara ara" wryly.

"Clearly it's mealtime, my goodness... What children who just can't settle down. Please pay attention and stop making trouble for our guests, okay?"

"The sound of blades with no windchimes in sight, how poetic... Oh, this one is plum flavored!"

Plucking out a pink noodles, Busujima casually enjoyed "bamboo basket noodles."

Although the situation was quite chaotic, Kyousuke was the only one in wide-eyed shock. Everyone else was enjoying themselves, utterly unfazed--

(...Am I the only normal person here?)

Recalling his classmate who shared normal person sensibilities, Kyousuke could not help but feel nostalgic.

Unable to process the situation before his eyes, Kyousuke looked up to the cloudy summer blue sky while his thoughts went to Maina who was currently staying behind in the school.

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"......Utterly exhausted in both body and mind."

Collapsed on the veranda, Eiri murmured in a feeble voice.

Although unscathed, she had been evading the twins' blades and Kagura's relentless interrogation the whole time. Eiri looked quite haggard after the ordeal.

All covered in sweat, she was lying face up on the ground while Renko was fanning her with a fan.

"You must be tired, Eiri. Want some watermelon juice?"

"...No thanks. I'll eat watermelon directly."

Pushing away the glass of red liquid, Eiri sat up. On Renko's other side, her right, Ayaka and Kyousuke were sitting side by side, munching on semi-circular slices of fruit.

"Wow, it's this sweet!? It's delicious, cooling you from the heart, Onii-chan."

"Yeah. Eating watermelon is a must for Japanese summers."

"Yeah, so true! Eating watermelon is a must~~~~~~... By the way, Kyousuke, after enjoying the tender juicy watermelon, you really must--"

"Cut the watermelons?"

"Shuko!? Where are you looking at while you speak, Eiri!? My watermelons are tender and delicate, so I hope you'll treat them gently, okay!?"

"...Yeah whatever."

Eiri answered Renko half-heartedly and reached for the watermelon. A tray was placed on the veranda and from there, she took an one-eighth slice of watermelon and started picking out seeds carefully with her fingernail.

"W-Woah... You're eating like a dainty little lady, Eiri-san! Picking them out will take forever, so just take a big bite."

"Mind your own business. It's my freedom to choose how I ate my watermelon."

"Yeah, everyone has their own way of eating. By the way, Eiri's method is very similar to Busujima-sensei's."

Renko pointed somewhere. Busujima was struggling with watermelon on the veranda slightly further away.

Using one hand to dig out watermelon seeds with a spoon, he was feeding squirming poisonous creatures gathered at his feet. Eiri froze for a moment.

"...I will begin now."

Eiri stopped her hands' motions and took a big bite of watermelon. She looked very repulsed by the idea of resembling Busujima. Kyousuke could not help but pity Busujima's extreme lack of popularity among the female students.

Unlike Kurumiya, he never engaged in active interference. From Kyousuke's standpoint, Busujima was not really someone to be hated...

While Kyousuke immersed in feelings of sympathy, the three girls surrounded Kyousuke and chatted happily in harmony.

At this time, Kyousuke looked out into the garden where traces from the dangerous playing earlier remained all over the place--

"By the way, members of your family seem to be prone to getting worked up? Are they born that way, trying to kill one another day in and day out?"

"...Yes. Members of the Akabane family start wielding blades at around the age of three and start fighting one another at the age of five. From then on, we draw blades on one another at the slightest provocation... Ten years old is when we're sent to the field for the first time. Once we reach twelve, we are supposed to be active as full-fledged assassins."

"Ehh, that sounds so amazing... How old is that trash Kagura again?"

"She's born in the same year as you. She'll be fourteen this year. In terms of assassination experience, she's had three years and a bit."

"What about the twins?"

"They're nine. It's almost time for them to take to the field."

Ayaka answered "oh..." and gobbled watermelon. Renko drank watermelon juice on the side with a slurp. Eiri looked down, staring at her fingertips intently.

"...Already, sixteen."

After a while, she inadvertently murmured to herself.

Dry, hoarse, cracked. Her voice sounded like it was about to shatter.

There was no need to ask her deliberately. What she meant by sixteen was her age after passing her birthday this summer. Had she been working as an assassin, according to her age, she would be starting her sixth year.

However, Eiri--

"...Sigh. By the way, even those two kids are about to overtake me. The first time I was sent to kill, they were just starting to hold blades... Fufu. How ludicrous. I'm a total disgrace, it's ludicrous."

"Eiri..."

"--It's already been six years, you know? Unable to kill, I still tried as hard as I could. In the blink of an eye, six years went by. But I didn't make the slightest progress... I still can't kill. Sent to an incomprehensible institution, I came to know you guys, finally eating watermelon in leisure here... What on earth am I doing? Will I have to be the Rusty Nail for the rest of my life?"

" " "......" " "

Eiri made fun of herself in a cheerful and laughing tone of voice.

Seeing Eiri like this, Kyousuke really had no idea what words to say.

Renko was in a similar situation as Eiri but was able to kill people as easily as breathing.

Ayaka was in completely different situation, yet thought nothing of the lives of people unrelated to her.

Then there was Kyousuke who grew up in a totally different environment as Eiri and still regarded murder as taboo.

Three people, three different sets of circumstances, each with their own subtle differences.

Eiri *wanted to kill* but *could not*, who could actually understand this dilemma?

To understand the agitation Eiri had kept in her heart these past six years...

(......Hmm?)

Suddenly, a certain fact flashed across Kyousuke's mind.

Six years. That was the number of years Eiri had spent after discovering she was unable to kill.

Six years ago, Eiri had just reached the age of ten, right? Then... That was the age when Eiri was sent to make her first kill--

"Geh!? What the heck, there's not a scrap left of the nagashi-soumen!?"

Something interrupted Kyousuke's thoughts. An rather agitated male voice.

Behind Kyousuke and company who were sitting on the veranda, a young man in a scarlet hakama was standing directly behind Eiri, his shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"Uwah, what a shame... I should've forced myself to stay up if I'd known we were having nagashi-soumen. Deliberately waking me up after the fact to let me know, that Kagura girl is going way too far, right!? Does she hold a big grudge against me? Rubbing it in my face that I missed the food!?"

"Nii-san--"

"Yo, good morning. Eiri. Was the nagashi-soumen fun?"

"...Not really."

"Yeah, that better be the case. You already moved on to the watermelon, damn you all!"

"Hey... S-Stop that!"

Basara rubbed Eiri's head randomly, causing Eiri to swat his hand away with displeasure.

Basara laughed "haha" then grabbed a slice of watermelon from the plate--

"I'm borrowing the seat next to you, Giant Knockers."

Then he sat down cross-legged next to Renko.

Instantly, Ayaka got up and scolded him.

"Oh come on! What the hell are you doing, sitting next to Renko-san just by making a random comment!? Trash like you are not worthy of sitting there. Get lost!"

"Trash!? Why are you suddenly pissed at me..."

"It's all because you're shamelessly sitting down next to Renko-san! Not only that, you bullied Eiri-san and treated her as an idiot. You even said to Ayaka--"

"Oh, I get it! The first time we met, I called you undeveloped and said I wasn't interested or some shit like that, so now you're sulking? Sorry yo... I actually find you quite cute, you know? It's just that I can't dig in when the age is too young! Unlike Kagura, your childish level equals your age."

"...You really want your head smashed like a watermelon, don't you?"

Ayaka's eyes lost their light. Seeing Ayaka about to go berserk, Renko instantly tried to console her.

"Don't be mad, don't be mad. Sitting next to me isn't such a big deal. So don't get so mad--Okay?"

"Muu. Ayaka will let you off since Renko-san said so."

Ayaka pouted and sat back down.

Basara exclaimed "Wow!" and rejoiced, smiling at Renko.

"Thanks, Giant Knockers--No wait, Renko-chan! I'm so happy that someone is standing up for me. I'm always surrounded by these pissed-off bitches. Your kindness is so touching..."

"Foosh. Having a giant bust, I am have a very big heart, Onii-san."

"Oh I get it! Now that you mention it, Eiri, Kagura and Ayaka-chan all have something in common as flat-chested girls with prickly personalities. What wise words you speak."

"Your dick is so gonna get twisted off."

"...Just go die already."

Ayaka swore while Eiri cursed him.

Basara replied "woah, so scary..." and took a bite of watermelon.

"Let's forget about breasts for now. Renko-chan, why don't you call me 'Basara' directly? You don't have to use honorifics. It should be a lot easier to chat this way."

"Yes, I know, Basara. Talking to a beauty might make you nervous, so don't get too stiff, okay?"

"Nah, I won't since your gas mask prevents me from seeing your face! You're showing more boobs than face! By the way, they look super huge. This beautiful scene is making a different part of me stiff..."

"Ooooooooooooooooooh~~~~~~!"

Basara's intentions were dead obvious. Ayaka growled at the sight.

Tugging Kyousuke's sleeve hard, she said:

"Onii-chan, onii-chan! Are you okay with letting that kind of flirty guy take advantage of Renko-san!? Don't you feel anything when Renko-san is getting ogled lewdly!?"

"......Hmm."

Kyousuke only realized it when prompted by Ayaka. Right now, his internal emotions were extremely agitated. It was after he saw Renko and Basara--chatting and laughing with another guy.

To think that emotions suspiciously similar to jealousy were surfacing in his heart.

He was quite shocked to discover this.

(No no no no! Impossible impossible impossible impossible, how could this happen!?)

Kyousuke instantly denied it and shook his head.

No way in hell that was possible. The impossible must absolutely not become possible..

He was someone who could not be more ordinary. How could he fall in love with a psycho killer who was going to murder him the instant their feelings became mutual?

As soon as he acknowledged these feelings, life would be over for Kyousuke. There was no going back. Rolling down the slope of destruction, he would capitulate instantly to the super Bad End of "life's termination."

He had no interest in this kind of ending at all. Hence--

"...Nah? I don't feel anything. It's just boobs, all men would want to have a look. There's no need to make huge fuss over it. Just let them be."

Kyousuke shifted his gaze away from Renko and Basara who were getting along happily, chatting nonstop, then started to eat watermelon.

Ayaka went "huh?" and swayed her twintails.

"...Onii-chan, are you feeling agitated?"

"Huh? Of course not."

"C-Clearly you are..."

"Nope."

Kyousuke stopped paying attention to her and munched on watermelon.

Ayaka blinked first then ask Eiri on the other side.

"...He is, don't you agree, Eiri-san?"

"Yeah, that's for sure, Definitely, no matter how you look at it... Hmph."

"That's weird. Why do you seem agitated too, Eiri-san?"

"No."

"R-Really..."

Confronted with a cold denial, Ayaka scratched her face--

"Fufu. Both Onii-chan and Eiri-san really like to put on airs... Fine, Ayaka finds it fun to watch from the side too!"

She smiled contentedly.

Then opening her jaws wide, she took a bite of watermelon.

"--By the way, what plans do you guys have next?"

After a while, all that remained on the plate were watermelon rinds. It was then when Basara asked.

Renko crossed her arms and went "hmm"--

"I think there's nothing special planned? I thought about having someone take us to tour the rest of the place, but nothing much apart from that. We've still got three more days, which'll probably be spent in leisure like this."

"...You're right. There's only homework left."

"It sounds like something trivial, but the volume of homework isn't something you can simply half ass, you know?"

Summer vacation at the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation was only one short week, but the volume of homework assigned was staggering.

Apart from book reports, self-directed research, there was also the exercise book entitled "summer vacation foe" that was almost as thick as a dictionary.

Kyousuke had cooperated with his friends to finish everything apart from the exercise book before setting off from school, but his progress on the exercises was roughly half so far. He was going to be dead meat unless he hurried up.

--At least that was what Kyousuke was thinking.

"Summer vacation foe? I already vanquished that thing centuries ago."

"You still haven't defeated it, Onii-chan?"

"Huh?"

As expected of the year group's number one and number three. While everyone else was pitting their life on the line to resist the formidable foe, they had already taken care of things easily...

"I still have almost a thousand pages--"

"So slow! And you're acting so not smart."

"What... did you say?"

Kyousuke was shocked to hear an insult from Eiri, who was second worst in the year.

--Unbelievable. Eiri's "summer vacation foe" included all her failed subjects. In other words, she should have nine books' worth.

In spite of that, what was with her calm composure...

"Just copy from someone else and you're done."

"...You know you'll get slaughtered if you get found out?"

"Dummy-Bane-san can't possibly get everything right. The game will be up instantly."

"Are you going back to nicknames, Ayaka-chan? But it's true that Eiri is a dummy."

"No need to worry on this front."

Eiri smiled confidently.

"Every couple hundred pages, I'll answer a question on my own and leave the others blank as though I didn't know the answer. If I go with this pattern, a single exercise book can be finished in no time, see?"

"...I see."

Kyousuke was certain she will be pummeled. "Wow, amazing--" Ayaka expressed her admiration in a wooden tone of voice while Renko nodded "Yeah. What a great idiot."

That being said, confronted with three thousand pages multiplied by ten exercise books, copying everything was simply not possible. Perhaps it would be wrong to assert Eiri's method as entirely mistaken.

As for disciplining, that was most likely inevitable...

"Hahaha! So it looks like you guys don't have anything definite planned."

Basara laughed after listening to their conversation, the corners of his lips curling up.

He began to search the sleeves of his kimono and finally found a piece of paper--

"...How about attending this tonight if you don't have plans? I found this stuck to the noticeboard at the foot of the mountain this morning."

Basara's suggestion made Kyousuke and his friends exchange glances with one another. Written clearly on the paper presented by Basara was--

'Summer Night Bon Dance Festival'

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A quiet village. Residents seldom visited the Akabane family while on the other hand, members of the Akabane household would descend to the village from time to time, purchasing food and other daily necessities there.

As a side note, those were all jobs for servants. Before becoming full-fledged adults--in other words, full-fledged assassins--members of the main family like Eiri were almost never permitted to go out until the age of twelve.

Since the eldest son, Basara, the eldest daughter, Eiri and the second daughter, Kagura, were all older than twelve, they could leave the mansion as long as the family head, Fuyou, gave permission.

On the other hand, as convicted murderers in the middle of serving their sentence(?), Kyousuke and friends asked Busujima and found out--

'...Go outside? It's fine if you want to leave the house, sure, but I'll have to accompany you guys the whole time, that's all.'

--That was the answer they got. It went without saying that this applied to Renko and Ayaka who were officially on parole, but even Kyousuke and Eiri could be treated the same way. It seemed like there was no problem as long as Busujima was accompanying them. That was the whole story--

"Woohoo, freedom!"

"We're free~~~~~~!"

The lady-in-waiting opened the main entrance for their group.

Ayaka and Renko raced ahead to run outside, expressing the exhilaration in their hearts by screaming.

"Aren't they rejoicing too much?"

"...Yawn."

Kyousuke and Eiri were standing inside the doorway, looking at Renko and Ayaka screaming and yelling.

"My, this is great... Such scenery is so truly beautiful!"

Basara extended his thumbs and index fingers to make a rectangular frame while squinting one of his bronze-colored eyes. Noticing his behavior, Eiri looked back and frowned.

"...What are you doing, Nii-san?"

"Fufufu. I want to brand these images onto the film of my heart and soul. Renko-chan, Ayaka-chan and Eiri dressed in yukatas! Your neck looks so pretty..."

Basara pulled back his focus and shrank his frame to capture Eiri's neck.

Eiri clicked her tongue disapprovingly and escaped his view.

"Seriously, you're a trashy pervert to the very core. Please don't subject me to your obscene gaze."

Glaring at Basara, Eiri was dressed in traditional Japanese instead of western clothing. She was wearing a yukata with a red background matched with peony patterns. Her hair, done up, was pinned with a white flower accessory.

In a rare display, Eiri was lightly made up and had a very clean and neat appearance overall. Seeing her in a yukata, Kyousuke had offered endless praise, but...

'H-Hmph... Really? Getting praised by someone like you doesn't make me happy at all. I'm not happy, okay!? I'm not putting on light make up because of your influence, got that!?'

--He was subjected to such harsh scolding.

Scolded like Kyousuke by Eiri, Basara shook his head and said "My goodness."

"How dishonest, my little sister... Whatever, I guess that's what makes you cute?"

Also, Eiri was not the only one who had changed her attire.

Respectively, Kyousuke and Busujima had changed into casual Japanese clothing, jinbei sets, whereas Renko and Ayaka were wearing yukatas.

Renko stopped immediately after going out, looking down to examine her outfit--

"It's definitely my first time in Japanese clothing. It feels a bit breezy? So uncomfortable. Wearing nothing down there, it feels kind of... embarrassing."

"Fufu. Ayaka won't mention it to others, but Renko-san, your hem is very short. It can't be helped that it bothers you. By the way, why did you pick this style?"

Speaking of which, the style of yukata Ayaka was wearing consisted of light purple fabric with a pattern of iris flowers. Taking a closer look, Kyousuke noticed dark purple flower accessories at the bases of her twintails.

If Eiri's yukata look was categorized under "beautiful", then Ayaka's gave an impression of "cute."

As for what Renko was wearing--

"This type!? Don't you find this style awesome!? Shuko--!"

--There was the gas mask and headphones she wore every day.

...If Kyousuke was to compromise as much as possible, he could ignore those two objects.

However, even her choice of outfit was quite weird this time. The yukata was bright blue with white and pink cherry blossom petals for decoration. Overall, it resembled more of a mini-skirt.

Frilly lace had even been sewn on the collar, sleeves, hem and sash.

With her hand on her hip, Renko made a pose, eliciting a very disgusted response from Ayaka.

"Really? No matter how much Ayaka supports Renko-san, this outfit still... feels very cheap, like cosplay as well... Like someone working in the sex industry."

"Sex industry!? Can't you choose a better word!?"

"Renko-san, you're the one who needs to choose better. What the heck is this weird look...? Ayaka really can't understand your tastes. The one who bought this kind of yukata is weird enough already."

"Oh, that one? I bought it."

Basara raised his hand, claiming responsibility on his own.

"I intended to have my girlfriend wear it. It's very sexy, right? I was thinking that it'd definitely look good on sexy Renko-chan. Combining a yukata with a gas mask is very avant-garde, just looking is making me excited. Your outfit really floats my boat, Renko-chan!"

Basara flashed his teeth in a grin and praised her. Hearing him, Renko laughed with a "foosh--"

"Yeah, I know, right!? Boys like this kind of getup after all. You actually like it, don't you, Kyousuke?"

"...Um."

Kyousuke did not know how to answer.

To be honest, he did not really like the look. Compared to a mini-skirt, an ordinary yukata would win outright in his view. Even in terms of decoration, the lace everywhere was a problem because it did not match a Japanese garment. It looked very bizarre.

Apart from that, there was the gas mask on her face that ruined all manner of mood.

There was nothing attractive from head to foot. But even so, what was with his reaction?

"...I-I suppose you're right. It feels not bad, I guess? I don't dislike... it."

Such words came out of his lips automatically.

Kyousuke himself did not understand why. However, he inexplicably felt displeased when the image of Basara praising Renko instantly surfaced in his mind--By the time he realized, he had already spoken.

Renko happily went "for reals!?" and raised her arms to cheer.

"Yay, that's awesome! Kyousuke praised me!? Foosh--Look look, my tastes in choosing a yukata is great after all, Ayaka-chan. Told you so!"

"Sigh, that's because you're the one wearing it, Renko-san. It's got nothing to do with the yukata... Didn't you notice Onii-chan's weird reaction when he saw it?"

"Eh, isn't that a huge difference? How weird... I remember you were praising so hard. Renko-chan, could it be that you've 'snagged' Kyousuke-kun!?"

"......"

Ayaka retorted to Renko calmly whereas Basara looked left and right between Renko and Kyousuke. As for Eiri, she was pouting with a scowl, twisting strands of hair in her ponytail around her finger.

"Thank you for waiting, sorry for the delay."

Kagura then appeared.

Like Eiri and the girls, she was also wearing a yukata. On the white fabric, there were flying red birds. Naturally, her disguised weapon was inserted in her sash--That fan blade, Red Bird.

"I was training until it was time to get ready. Is it time to leave already?"

"Yes, it takes ten minutes from home to the foot of the mountain by car. Then from there to the venue requires twenty minutes of walking, so we'll arrive with perfect timing."

"Hmph."

Basara replied to her but Kagura reacted with disdain.

Then she sighed.

"...Basara-niisan. You've got some really bizarre hobbies. Going out of your way to attend those lowly commoners' festival at the foot of the mountain, don't tell me that you're there to go pick up girls?"

"Haha. No, no, I'm just looking to experience 'summer' in this lively crowd, that's all."

Basara smiled and spread his arms wide.

A summer night event was being held at the middle school at the foot of the mountain from 6 to 9pm tonight--a Bon Dance Festival. Kyousuke and company were gathered here to attend the event.

Because a certain person was the one who proposed going, Kyousuke and Eiri actually did not really want to go...

'Bon Dance Festival!? Never heard of it, really wanna go, super wanna go! Foosh--'

'Ayaka too, Ayaka wants to go! Ayaka wants to go goldfish scooping with Renko-san and eat shaved ice together!'

Renko and Ayaka's insistence was too terrifying, so in the end, they agreed to take part.

Having changed into borrowed clothing, they had all gathered in front of the main entrance.

"By the way..." Basara said while looking at Kagura.

"It's a bit surprising that you'd tag along, you know? You're always training nonstop during your waking hours, Kagura, so it's quite unusual given your cold personality. What wind brings you here?"

"Nothing much."

Kagura turned her face away in disdain.

"Fuyou-sama told me to come. She said I needed to relax once in a while... No other reason. It's not like I decided to come on my own."

"Really?"

Leaving behind the lightly grinning Basara, Kagura started walking on her own.

A red limo was parked right in front of the main entrance. The lady-in-waiting opened the door to the back seats. Ayaka cheered and entered the car with Renko to sit down.

"Well, let's go in too."

"Oh, okay..."

Kyousuke was intimidated by the Akabane family's luxurious ways and followed after Eiri.

The last people remaining were Basara and Busujima.

Glancing at the poor-looking middle-aged man, Basara pressed his palm to his forehead.

"Eh, how weird. I was expecting to hug yukata girls left and right, making them scream for me... But let alone a lady on each arm, aren't we getting left out, Sensei?"

"Eh, I'm getting left out again!?"

"...You are. Sensei, you've never joined in their conversations the whole time."

"Eh!? I-I guess you're right--"

"...It's hopeless. Looks like I'll have to take Kagura's advice and go pick up girls."

Busujima was greatly shocked while Basara felt a wave of fatigue. Over in the limo, Kyousuke was surrounded by girls, attracting their attention in Basara's place.

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After reaching the foot of the mountain, the group left the limousine and made their way to the venue. The lady-in-waiting asked them to come wait for her at the same location for the trip back. After parting with her, Kyousuke and company walked into the quiet village.

On the side was rural scenery filled with greenery with not a lot of houses. With crisp green curves as the background, there were rows of dark gray metal towers.

Nearing sunset, the summer sky had a flavor of serenity with gentle sunlight.

The country road was covered with a layer of asphalt. Led by Basara, the procession marched along their way.

Kyousuke, Renko, Ayaka, Eiri, Kagura, Basara, Busujima... What a grand lineup. All the local residents passing by jumped in fright, their gazes focused on the group, whispering among themselves.

"Hey, look now--" "Those people look very unfamiliar." "One of them has her face covered up." "Are these people from the village?" "No way? They're from there, living in the mountains--" "Oh, I think they're called... the Akabane. People say they're very rich." "Right! I've seen it before by chance. A very classy red limo driving into the mountains." "Should we try talking to them?" "I'm too scared!" "Gramps told me not to get involved with those people." "My granny said the same." "Mommy--that lady over there is wearing a mask, right? Looks fun, doesn't it?" "Hush! Quit staring!"

The crowd kept chattering and commenting away. This was because Kyousuke's group were dressed up glamorously and highly conspicuous. The closer they reached the Bon Dance Festival venue, the more people walking about, turning their curious gazes at Kyousuke's group.

However, the sun was gradually setting. The sounds of Japanese dance music and drumming could be heard. Under the cover of the dimming night sky, fewer and fewer people paid attention to them.

"Eh? ...It seems more busy than expected!"

Perhaps because there was an abundance of land in the countryside with lots of free space, the premises of the venue, the middle school, was quite vast. Centered around a stage set up in the sports ground, there were many lanterns hung up for decoration. The orange light dyed the evening glow of the sky.

On the outskirts were many outdoor vendors, selling fried noodles, deep-fried chicken, roasted corn, cheese potatoes and game stalls such as fishing water balloons or scooping goldfish, all lined up together with bustling crowds.

The venue behind Basara was filled with people coming and going. He turned his head towards Kyousuke's group and said:

"Okay, how are we going to walk around? Seven people is a bit much, so let's split into two groups here--"

"What a sight, too amazing a sight! What is with this scenery, it's awesome--!"

Renko cried out in excitement and grabbed Kyousuke's hand.

"Looks so fun! Let's hurry and go over there, okay, Kyousuke!?"

"Woah!? Hey, stop dragging me--"

"Let's go, let's go, you'll miss out if you delay any longer!? Hurry up, Onii-chan!"

Ayaka swiftly grabbed Kyousuke's other hand and walked past Basara. Thus, the three of them made their way towards the stalls. Eiri went "oh, wait for me, okay!?" and chased after them.

"......"

Seeing the four of them gradually recede in the distance, Basara turned his head to look at the remaining group, forced a stiff smile and scratched his cheek...

"Oh--Hmm. This happens to be two groups, hahaha... If you don't mind, I'll drop out and go on my own?"

"...Doesn't matter. I don't care, Basara-niisan. I'd also like to walk around on my own instead of staying with you guys."

"Huh? What's with this way of splitting up? Then there's no point in coming here as a group..."

Basara made his suggestion with a serious face and Kagura accepted very readily.

Leaving behind the surprised Busujima, the two of them walked away in different directions.

"That's right, I wanted to walk around alone in the first place. As if anyone wants to browse vendor stalls with Nee-san's bunch... Hmph, how ludicrous!"

"I never thought the girls would all get taken away... Now that things have come to this, I'll just have to pick up chicks all over again! Kyousuke-kun, just you wait--!?"

"...I guess I'll grab a beer."

After Kagura and Basara departed, Busujima walked towards the sports ground.

The public announcement system was playing Japanese dancing accompaniment with drum music. People's joyful laughter was mixed among it.

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"Kyousuke, Kyousuke! What's that?"

"That's cotton candy. They're selling it inside cartoon character bags."

"That's so amazing? Look, there's red food that's like a ruby?"

"That's candied apple. You coat a raw apple with a layer of sugar--"

"Uwahhhhhhhhh!? Hurry and look, they seem to be selling something indecent over there!?"

"...Those are frankfurters, not something indecent."

"Ohhh, over there too!? So many black and thick things!"

"Those are chocolate bananas. Stop using such weird descriptions, okay?"

"Hey Kyousuke... Don't you smell the stench of squid?"

"They're roasting it right in front of you! Come on, you must be making these comments on purpose, right!?"

Renko looked like she was attending this kind of festival for the first time, pointing out everything and asking questions. Kyousuke smiled wryly.

Renko's getup still stood out quite a lot, but the gas mask could be interpreted as a mask sold by a vendor, so it looked less out of place.

Kyousuke then asked Renko whose arm was locked with his.

"...By the way, do you want to eat something? If anything catches your fancy, just tell me--"

"She can't eat, Onii-chan."

Tugging at Kyousuke's sleeve on the opposite side to Renko, Ayaka said to Kyousuke.

Hearing that, Kyousuke recalled something.

He looked at the gas mask on Renko's face.

"Oh right, good point... Sorry. In that case, how about drinks? Or playing games like throwing hoops or shooting targets? We've got to enjoy ourselves now that we're here!"

"Can't play, Onii-chan. We don't have a single cent on us, right?"

"--Oh."

Oh right. Although they wanted to play some of those little games, tragically, they were penniless.

In other words, all they could do was stare from the sidelines...

Lick lick.

"...Hey, what's that?"

Just as Kyousuke was thinking, he saw Eiri licking a candied apple on a bamboo stick.

Eiri made a "You don't know?" look.

"What do mean, 'that'? It's a candied apple."

"Did you steal it!?"

"...Huh? How could that be possible."

"Otherwise, you must have used that kind of method, to demand one from the vendor, right!? No matter how pretty you are, you can't go using that kind of--"

"Take this."

Interrupting Kyousuke who had gone red to his neck, Eiri extended a purse out to him.

"...Here's the money. Okaa-sama said to me 'spend it however you wish.' A total of fifty thousand yen. I bought a candied apple, so there's 49700 yen remaining."

"Eh."

--50000 yen? That's way too much for buying refreshments at vendor stalls.

Kyousuke jumped in surprise while Ayaka took the purse on his behalf with a smile.

"Wow, thanks~! Eheheh... But is it really okay?"

"Yes. After all, it's just pocket money. Spend it however you like."

Eiri answered indifferently and licked her candied apple.

Eyes flashing, Ayaka said "...a rich girl after all" and clutched the purse tightly. Kyousuke was truly awed by the Akabane family's money attitudes and bowed his head in trepidation, thanking.

"Thank you for your generosity, Lady Eiri."

"Don't call me that. By the way, Okaa-sama is the one you should be thanking, right?"

"We need to be grateful to Eiri and Auntie, thank you both! It's thanks to you two that we can enjoy this Bon Festival to the max. I love you, Eiri! Love you~~~~~~! Foosh--"

"Wait... Stop pressing against me, you're very annoying, okay!?"

Eiri struggled out of Renko's hug and clicked her tongue.

Then she licked her candied apple as though trying to regain her calm--

"...Anyway, you guys should go buy something, right?"

"Yeah. Lemme see--"

"Hey hey."

Just as Kyousuke was looking around, Renko tugged his sleeve.

"Kyousuke, what's that?"

Renko pointed at a certain object, a shallow aquarium that was placed on the ground. In front were two kids dressed in yukatas, crouching while looking at things in the tank, focused single-mindedly on competing with something.

"...Oh, that's goldfish scooping. It's a challenge to see how many goldfish you can scoop using paper that breaks easily when wet."

"Hmm? Sounds very fun. I feel like trying it!"

"Oh okay. What about you, Ayaka...? Huh, weird?"

Just as Kyousuke turned his gaze away from Renko, he could not find Ayaka anywhere.

The purse was with Ayaka, so at this rate, they could not even play goldfish scooping. Searching for Ayaka who had disappeared somewhere, Kyousuke looked around for a while--

"Sorry for making you wait!"

--Ayaka jogged back.

She was holding two bottles in each hand. Blue glass bottles of slender shape. Ayaka raised the bottles next to her face and flashed a toothy grin.

"Speaking of vendor stalls, this is a must buy--Here, enjoy!"

"Oh, okay... Thanks."

"...Thank you."

"What is it?"

Renko received the bottle from Ayaka's hand and examined it from the sides, staring in wonderment. Condensation dripped from the bottle's body while Renko illuminated the bottle using a lantern's light--

"Let me guess, this should be... a drink, right? A soft drink? But it's shape is weird. The middle is so narrow! What is this, Ayaka-chan?"

"This is called Ramune."

"...RAMUNE?"

"Yes. You have to drink it when going to a festival."

"Really? Since you say so, here goes... Eh, umm. Where do I start?"

"You have to open the bottle like this, see?"

Renko was immediately lost after preparing her straw. Kyousuke demonstrated once. Opening the wrapper, he aimed the protruding bottle opening tool at the beverage's opening and pressed down all at once.

--Kyupon! After a very crisp sound, the marble sealing the neck was pushed down while bubbles emerged from the soft drink. Renko exclaimed "shuko!?" and leaned back in surprise.

"Wow, looks like something's coming out... Is it a crystal?"

"A glass bead. It's pretty, right?"

"Yeah, so pretty... Looks amazing. I'll have a go too!"

Renko got all fired up and began to open her own Ramune.

Imitating Kyousuke, she tore off the wrapper and aimed the bottle opener at the opening--

"Uwahhhhhh!?"

Just as the bottle opener was pushed in, bubbles emerged fiercely, spewing out.

The beverage inside dripped out, putting Renko in a panic, unsure what to do next.

"W-Whaaaaat happened!? It exploded just now!? Only mine exploded!? Uwahhhhh... Hurry and help me~~~!"

"Ohh? Just as I expected..."

"Kusukusu. No good, if you don't press with the right force--"

"Kyah!?"

"Even you don't know how, Eiri-san!?"

"J-Just go die already..."

Eiri's hands were made wet and sticky by the Ramune soft drink. She was glaring at the bottle rolling on the ground. It looked like she had accidentally released the bottle when it startled her while she was opening it.

Ayaka picked up the bottle and frowned, muttering "hopeless?"

"The bottle's mouth is dirty. How about Ayaka buy new ones for you?"

"...No thanks. I'll buy it myself."

"Don't worry! Foosh--"

"You're in no position to tell me that."

"Hahaha. Never mind, it can't be helped since I'm not used to it. It's your first time too, right, attending a Bon Dance Festival?"

"I--"

Mid-sentence, Eiri suddenly stuttered.

She seemed to be thinking something quietly for a while before saying:

"...This is currently, the second time. But it's almost like coming here for the first time."

After saying that, Eiri turned around.

Taking her own Ramune bottle from Ayaka's hand, she started walking away.

"Oh--Hey, where are you going?"

"I'm going to throw away the bottle... You guys go scoop some goldfish, okay? There are many ponds in my home, so don't worry about catching too much."

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"Take that!"

Crouching in front of an aquarium, Renko yelled with vigor, swinging the object in her hand. With astounding force, the plastic scoop went straight for the bulging-eye goldfish in the water then exited the water.

Water splashed everywhere. Crouching next to Renko, Ayaka exclaimed "so cold!?" and jumped to the side.

"...Eh? It broke already?"

"Of course. Why did you suddenly go full force... It'll break as soon as it touches water, right?"

The paper in Renko's scoop already had a huge hole torn in it. Wiping her wet cheeks with her yukata's sleeve, Ayaka readied the scoop in her hand.

"Listen carefully, Renko-san. Goldfish scooping is actually a game requiring precision skills. First you have to pick your target. Find dummies that are spacing out near the water surface. If you scoop from the tail, they'll escape, so it's better to start with the head. You have to pay attention to the water pressure situation while moving your scoop, then lift it all at once... Like this!"

--After a bit of slipping, the goldfish slid off the paper and escaped the scoop.

Frozen for several seconds, Ayaka then showed an embarrassed smile on her face.

"Umm, ehhhh... That's weird? Maybe it's been too long, so Ayaka's hand is rusty. Okay, Ayaka will scoop again... Watch!"

--Another slippery escape. She had aimed for the same goldfish but it successfully slipped away.

Staring at the goldfish, Ayaka's expression went blank.

"......"

For a while, she silently swung the scoop. However, she did not even catch the fish once. Apparently starting to get agitated, Ayaka's hand movements turned more and more violent--

" "Ah!?"

Finally, the paper broke.

Light vanished completely from the irises of Ayaka, whose scoop was no longer usable against the red goldfish swimming gracefully before her eyes. In the next second, she acted outrageously.

"...Time to behave, Mr. Goldfish. Let this game end here--!?"

Ayaka dipped the broken scoop into the water.

Aiming for the goldfish that had slipped out of her hand countless times, she swept the scoop sideways--

"See? Ayaka has caught it, right? Kusukusu..."

Pinning the goldfish between the scoop and the aquarium wall, she squeezed and grabbed it.

Fished out in this kind of manner, the goldfish panted while exposed to the air, before finally getting tossed into a bowl. The poor goldfish looked so feeble, floating in the water limply.

"--Okay, that's how you scoop them! Understood?"

"Yes. You don't do things with precision at all, I've understood completely."

"...Goldfish are living creatures too, you know? Don't abuse them."

"Using the aquarium wall is not allowed, little lady. But since you're cute, I'll overlook it."

"Ehehe. Sorry?"

Reminded by the stall owner, Ayaka stuck her tongue out. Kyousuke warned her "don't cause too much trouble for others, okay?" first and paid the stall owner a thousand yen note.

"Anyway, here's the payment. Please let her play again."

"No problem. Aren't you gonna have a go too?"

"No thanks, I wasn't planning to... I'm happy enough to watch from the side."

Kyousuke's hands were blunt to the level of a god of destruction's and super bad at scooping goldfish.

Renko received a new scoop from the stall owner and got all fired up.

"Hmph, shuko--! Next time, I'll surely catch one. I'll show everyone my true skills!"

"Kusukusu, Ayaka is feeling the skills returning! Ayaka will bring out finishing moves surpassing the wall-squeeze and bring back a massive catch of goldfish."

With an evil smile surfacing on her face, Ayaka readied her new scoop.

--After that, the girls spent quite a lot of time in the world of goldfish scooping.

Renko started out poorly but soon caught on the trick. Starting from her third scoop, she kept catching goldfish one after another.

On the other hand, goldfish kept slipping out of Ayaka's grasp and she failed to catch a single one for the longest time. Halfway through, she gave up on legitimate methods and switched to cheating.

Using the scoop to hit goldfish sometimes, using the bowl to scoop fish along with water, or using the scoop handle to poke goldfish until they went limp, finally extending her hand to catch them to her heart's content while the owner was not looking.

Renko and Ayaka were having great fun while Kyousuke watched them from behind.

At this moment, before his eyes--

"...Take this, it's for you."

A serving of fried noodles was thrust before his face. Just as he was wondering what was happening, he realized Eiri had brought it. Apart from fried noodles, Eiri was also carrying takoyaki, okonomiyaki and frankfurters.

Just as he was puzzling where she had gone off for so long, it turned out she had gone to visit other stalls.

"Oh thanks. I was just getting hungry... By the way, how did you pay, Eiri?"

"I kept 10000 yen on me. It'd be too careless to let one person hold all the money, right?"

"Oh--I get it... Say, you seem to be very thoughtful even in the small details."

"It's nothing."

Eiri coldly turned her face away--

"...Those two have been scooping goldfish the whole time?"

She turned her gaze at Renko and Ayaka. The two girls were engrossed in hunting goldfish, completely unaware that Eiri had returned.

Using his teeth to tear apart disposable chopsticks, Kyousuke answered:

"Yeah. Repeating again and again, they've played around five times now. Why don't you have a go?"

"...Hmm. Not interested."

Eiri replied with disinterest, her cheeks stuffed with takoyaki.

Kyousuke started to eat fried noodles--It was great. The sauce was fragrant, the vegetables were sweet, the meat was tasty and with garnishings of seaweed powder, playing a wonderful harmony of flavors.

Having spent the past few days eating such delicious food, Kyousuke felt that returning to life at school will be tough.

All they were fed there were leftovers again and again...

"It feels unbelievable."

Kyousuke suddenly started talking to himself. Hearing him, Eiri frowned.

She returned the frankfurter she was about to eat back into its box while asking:

"...In what way?"

"Like this, going together with you girls to somewhere normal people visit."

"Oh, that's true... To you, this kind of life is what you'd call normal, right?"

Speaking softly, Eiri turned her gaze to her surroundings.

People were coming and going, with husbands and wives bringing children, smiling youngsters, lovey-dovey couples. There were men and women, young and old, gathered around the stage to watch the dancing. Finally, there were the lanterns giving off orange light.

Also--

"......"

Eiri's gaze finally rested upon the school building's shadow, towering at the back of the festival venue.

That facility did not resemble the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation. Instead, it was very normal--a school for normal children of society to attend classes. Born in the dark side of society, growing up in the dark side of society, Eiri was still living in the dark side of society. To her, this place would be unusual, the world she was not used to. Eiri kept staring intently at the school building as though she were about to be sucked into it. Kyousuke wondered what exactly was going through her mind...

"Oh, Eiri!"

Kyousuke became mesmerized by the side of Eiri's face, only regaining his senses when Renko called out.

Eiri went "...Hmm" and was brought back to reality.

"When did you get back? And you took the chance to buy a ton of stuff! Great, they look so tasty. I wanna eat too... But I can't!"

Staring at the frankfurters and okonomiyaki, Renko stomped the ground and sulked.

Ayaka went "ah--!" and pointed at Eiri.

"Eiri-san, so unfair! To think you bought so much goodies to eat--"

"Here you go."

Ayaka stood up in protest and Eiri handed okonomiyaki over with a set of disposable chopsticks. She had not forgotten to prepare Ayaka's share, apparently.

"...What unfair? It's not like I bought it all to hog on my own, right? Seeing you were so busy with goldfish scooping, I went ahead to buy food for everyone."

Saying "Eiri-san..." with glimmering eyes, Ayaka reached out to receive the serving of okonomiyaki.

Renko grumbled with dissatisfaction:

"Ooooooh. No way, nothing for me? Don't tell me there's nothing that can be eaten with a gas mask!?"

"...Yes there is, like shaved ice. But it'd melt by the time I brought it back and I don't know what flavor you like, which is why I didn't buy it. Go buy it yourself."

"Hrmph. If that's the reason, I don't mind..."

After muttering her complaints, Renko returned her ruptured scoop to the stall owner. Ayak also returned her scoop. With a bags of goldfish dangling from their hands as their spoils of victory, Kyousuke's group left the stall.

"Foosh--By the way, we really caught a lot."

"That goes without saying. Ayaka and Renko-san is a strong partnership!"

"...That owner guy must be quite distraught."

When they were leaving, Kyousuke felt that the guy's business smile was convulsing.

Just as the group was going to buy shaved ice for Renko and discussing what game stall to play next--

"--Oh?"

They discovered someone familiar.

A girl dressed in a white yukata with red birds flying--Kagura--was standing in front of a stall, receiving a candied apple from the owner. Those rust-red eyes looked bored, just as they captured the sight of Kyousuke's entourage--

"...Hmph."

--She immediately turned her gaze away together with her face.

Before they could call out to her, she walked away without looking back.

"Don't tell me she's walking around on her own?"

"...Others are the same. It's quite normal to walk around on your own, right?"

Eiri motioned with her chin in a certain direction, where three unfamiliar girls were gathered around Basara who was playing a shooting game. Noticing Kyousuke's group gazing at him, Basara instantly made a smug expression and adjusted the gun in his hand. Was he showing off how successfully he had picked up girls...?

Kyousuke looked farther to see Busujima spacing out with a beer in hand, looking like he was muttering to himself.

Indeed, hanging out with those two did not seem very fun.

"But even if that's true, it's lonely to walk around alone, right? It's better to ask her--"

"I already asked her."

"Huh?"

"I met her earlier when I was throwing the bottle away. I asked if she wanted to join us but she refused as though it'd be annoying to walk around with me as a pair. So don't mind her."

".......I see."

There was no helping it if she refused outright. By the way, why did she come along then?

Even if it was Fuyou's advice, it was not like receiving an order...

"It's not wooooooorking, I can't suck it up the straw! So I have to wait patiently for it to melt?"

Just as these thoughts crossed Kyousuke's mind, Renko wailed tragically.

She had inserted her straw into blue Hawaiian flavored shaved ice, intending to suck, but it did not seem to be going well. Ayaka received her lemon shaved ice from the vendor and giggled.

"What a disaster, Renko-san. Why don't you try a failed attempt at suicide to force the limiter off?"

"Great idea! I'll go try dying and be right back."

"Hold it right there."

Kyousuke grabbed Renko's collar from behind and stopped her. It would be no joke if the limiter were to be removed in this kind of place. Kyousuke's entire body was plunged into fear. Ayaka handed shaved ice to him.

"Here you go, Onii-chan! There's one for Eiri-san too."

"Thank you."

"...Thanks."

Kyousuke's was honeydew melon flavored while Eiri's was strawberry.

"So sweet... But it's good. Can I have try some of your lemon-flavored?"

"Please go ahead! If you're okay with it, try some of Onii-chan's too?"

"Hmm. I-I'll pass on his..."

"Fufu. Are you embarrassed about an indirect kiss?"

"Huh!? O-O-O-O-Of course not, okay!? Are you kidding me!?"

While Kyousuke and the others could not wait to enjoy their shaved ice, Renko scratched her head hysterically.

"Oooooooh. What the heck, what the heck!? It's terrible that you guys can eat it all! I wanna eat freshly prepared shaved ice too! Wanna eat fried noodles, wanna eat takoyaki, wanna eat roasted squid, wanna eat okonomiyaki, wanna eat frankfurters, wanna eat chocolate bananas, crepes, I wanna eat candied apples!!"

"...Just take off the mask if you wanna eat, miss?"

"Shut up!"

Renko snarled back in anger at the vendor who had retorted without knowing the inside story.

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After finishing their shaved ice, Kyousuke's group arrived at the water balloon fishing stall.

Red, blue, yellow, green, white, pink... Inside the inflatable pool were water balloons of different colors which had to be fished out using a hooked tool

This was a relatively simple game compared to goldfish scooping. Renko and Ayaka were able to fish the water balloons of their liking. Renko fished out red, pink and red balloons while Ayaka chose purple and orange ones. Like goldfish scooping, Eiri did not join in, so the two girls fished a red and white balloon for her.

Next was a shooting game but Eiri still continued to watch without taking part.

This time, even Kyousuke tried to invite her--

"...No thanks. Guns are not my specialty."

--Eiri refused like that. With a water balloon dangling from her hand, she watched the shooting game while spacing out. She was not eating or drinking and it looked like her heart was no longer in the present.

Kyousuke felt quite concerned about Eiri, making him unable to focus on aiming at the target. Sandwiched between the excited and noisy Renko and Ayaka, Kyousuke felt a bit unsettled--

"----"

At this moment, Eiri silently left the stall.

Kyousuke put down the toy gun and called to Eiri.

"Hey Eiri! Where are you going?"

Eiri lowered her eyes for an instant then said:

"To the washroom."

"Oh, okay... I see."

After replying indifferently, she walked away without looking back. After yelling "take care" at her back, Renko and Ayaka immediately went back to playing the shooting game.

Kyousuke accepted her explanation for now, but just as he was going to continue shooting--

"Oh-- ...Sorry, I need to go to the washroom too."

--Very concerned with Eiri's attitude, Kyousuke put down the toy gun again.

Renko and Ayaka only had the shooting game on their minds...

"Take care, okay? Yeah, I have to hit the target this time... Damn it, why won't it fall over!?"

"It must be that. They must've done something behind the target. How cocky... Let's focus fire to break it... Oh. Take care, Onii-chan."

While reloading her gun with a cork, Ayaka responded hastily and strategized. Judging by how into it she was, Kyousuke decided it should be fine to neglect her for a while.

"You two continue onwards if I don't return quickly, okay?"

Leaving behind these words, Kyousuke left the shooting game stall.

He turned his head and searched around for Eiri but could not find her initially. After advancing in the direction where Eiri had left, he looked carefully--

"Eiri!"

"......Kyousuke?"

Weaving through the packed crowd, Kyousuke finally caught up to Eiri in the outskirts of the sports ground.

Eiri looked back in surprise.

"Why did you follow? Do you need me for something?"

"Nothing much, I just happened to need a visit to the toilet too."

"Really?"

Eiri's attitude seemed colder than usual.

She pointed to Kyousuke's right--

"...The washroom is over there. Bye now."

Eiri starting going left after telling him the position. Her feet were taking her towards the exit--in other words, the school gates. Kyousuke hastily chased after her.

"Hey, where are you going!?"

"Nowhere."

"Wait up!"

Although he called to her, Eiri did not stop walking. She did not heed Kyousuke's call and rapidly left the sports ground. Kyousuke followed her relentlessly and asked:

"Aren't you going to the washroom?"

"Right back at you."

"...My affairs aren't that important right now."

"In that case, there's nothing important about my affairs either, right?"

"Wrong."

"...Why?"

"Because I'm worried about you."

"--Huh?"

Eiri stopped and glared at Kyousuke.

"Worried about me... Huh? There's nothing about me that needs your concern. Incomprehensible... It feels very annoying to attract unnecessary concern, so cut it out."

"W-Why do you find me annoying...?"

"It's very annoying."

Eiri looked away and started fidgeting with strands of her hair.

"...Did I say anything? I said nothing at all, right? But you just jumped to conclusions and interfered, poking your finger into none of your business... What the heck is that? You want to get cut down? I've already acommodated everyone's mood on purpose, why do you still have to--"

"You're accommodating too much, fool."

Eiri kept grumbling in irritation but Kyousuke cut her off.

His words carried slight anger--

"You're too accommodating for the people around you... How can you be happy that way? You haven't smiled even once the whole time here, and now you won't even let others worry about you? Stop asking for the impossible... Lying on purpose just to spend time alone. Even if you don't say anything, I know it all."

"Hmm--"

Eiri bit her lip.

Standing in front of her, Kyousuke tried to block her path and continued:

"Back when I was troubled over Ayaka, what did you say to me? You said it was fine to have you pamper me... I'm returning the same words to you. Rely on me more, Eiri. Although I don't know if I can help you, I don't find you troublesome at all. If you're troubling over something and suffering, I hope you won't keep it all inside. Tell me!"

"Kyousuke..."

Eiri gazed at Kyousuke.

She kept gazing then fell silent for a while--

"...Hmph. I knew it, you're hopeless as a nice guy to a fault."

She said in derision and pushed Kyousuke aside. Then with rapid footsteps, she headed directly to the school gates.

"H-Hey--"

"Let's go somewhere else, shall we?"

Eiri sighed and stopped Kyousuke from calling to her.

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The crescent moon was narrow and sharp, hanging high in the silver-blue night sky.

Just slightly away from the festival venue, there were much fewer streetlights and the crowd had subsided. The bustle of the Bon Festival grew ever distant while a symphony of frogs and insect gradually sounded clearer.

Catching up to Eiri who kept walking without saying a word, Kyousuke traveled along a rural road.

The greenery in the fields were blown by the wind, playing refreshing sounds.

"Hey Kyousuke..."

Eiri spoke to him. She turned around completely...

"--How about we escape right here?"

--She said that. In contrast to her joking tone of voice, her facial expression could not be more serious.

Gazed at by her unreadable eyes, Kyousuke did not know what to do.

"Escape right here, are you... serious?"

"No."

She denied it without even thinking. Eiri turned around, facing him with her back.

Her gaze fell to their feet--

"I know very well... there's nowhere to run."

It was a whisper. So quiet it almost disappeared.

Along this deserted rural road, Eiri took a deep breath.

"I... counting back, it was six years ago. That day, I had happened to go out like this too."

Next, she started recounting the whole story.

Eiri revealed what she had kept hidden in the bottom of her heart all along--

"I had just turned ten then and was about to be taken out to broaden my horizons for the first time... I spent every day training from morning till night, honing my skills. I am the Akabane family's eldest daughter. The entire clan had their hopes on me. So back then, I absolutely must not fail."

Eiri looked up at the night sky while she spoke. Her ponytail fluttered in the wind...

"Seeing me like that, Otou-sama said this to me: 'Tonight, let's go for a walk.' ...I guessed that he was worrying about me, but I had no mood at all. Up till then, I had spent all my days at home, my mind focused on assassination only. But after actually going outside and attending a Bon Dance Festival, those feelings were swept away."

She was probably reminiscing her feelings from back then.

Eiri's voice was filled with a gentle presence.

"Everything before my eyes was so new and fresh, so interesting, so stimulating. I was as excited as Renko. Holding my father's adult hand, I walked around the stalls. Because we had sneaked out, he could not allow me to do anything that would leave evidence. There was one wish I insisted no matter what and kept begging him--Can you guess what it was?"

Asked by Eiri, Kyousuke mobilized his mind.

Looking at the water balloon carried in Eiri's hand, he said:

"Fishing water balloons?"

"Wrong."

"...Scooping goldfish?"

"Wrong again."

"Then... a shooting game?"

"Almost."

Eiri smiled mischievously.

"It was a plushie."

"...Plushie?"

"Yes. A shooting game had a prize, an extra large plushie... I really wanted it, so I begged him to help me shoot down that plushie. And that plushie was Puutaro--the last gift I received from Otou-sama."

"Oh..."

Hearing her say that, Kyousuke remembered.

Eiri sleeping while hugging Puutaro.

'Without him, I can't sleep well!' This plushie reassured her. To Eiri, it was surely treasure that was filled with the memories of her father.

However, the father whom Eiri loved even more than Puutaro had--

"That week after the Bon Festival ended, Otou-sama went out on a mission. He asked me to wait for him to return and he'd take me together next time... In the end, he never came back. Rather... when he returned, Otou-sama was no longer recognizable. He no longer looked himself."

"......So that's what happened."

Eiri kept recounting. Her tone of voice was very quiet throughout.

Her voice sounded like she was suppressing her emotions and also hoarse from using it too much. It was a gray and melancholic tone color.

"--I wanted to kill the enemy, that was what I thought at the time. The guy who had done this to Otou-sama, I wanted him to taste the same pain. Day after day, I swung my blade, lost in training... But in spite of that."

At this point, her emotions surfaced.

Eiri's slender shoulders began to shake.

"Even though that was what I was supposed to do, I could not kill anyone... Let alone avenge Otou-sama, I could not even kill a defenseless ordinary person! Just as my blade was about to sever a vital, I remember Otou-sama--What I felt when Otou-sama passed away... That kind of feeling was superimposed over the target! After all, I knew very clearly in my heart. On a certain day, when something precious was suddenly stolen by someone, how deep a shock that was. How sad and sorrowful... I knew better than anyone."

"Eiri..."

Kyousuke's memories of what Eiri had told him previously in the infirmary.

Suppressing her sobs, she had told him she could not kill anyone.

Those words carried her hatred towards the murder of her most beloved father and heavy sorrow that could never be burned away by hatred.

Eiri laughed in self-deprecation and started to condemn herself.

"...I'm so stupid, right? Putting irrelevant people before my avenging my father, making myself unable to deliver the blow. I am too nice for my own good even more than you are... Because of that, I can't do anything. I can't prove myself useful anywhere. It's too shameful. A total... disgrace. I'm a disgrace to Okaa-sama, Kagura, Nii-san, Muramasa, Ryou, Ran, the branch family. I'm a disgrace to Otou-sama."

"......"

Just as he suspected, Eiri had not gone to the offering table to pay respects.

Because of her guilt towards the Akabane family and to her father, she could not bring herself to approach the place where the spirits of the dead returned. Instead, she had gone to visit the graves.

"--Listen here."

Kyousuke spoke to Eiri in her current state.

He asked something that had been bothering him the whole time.

"Does your family really want you to become an assassin? Do they really expect you to take revenge? Your father--"

"That goes without saying."

Eiri answered without thinking and turned to face him.

Residing in her eyes was light like a blade's.

"My family is renowned in assassination, you know? Training in the skills of assassination since early childhood, then making a splash in the world of bloodshed... All generations have gone through this. How could they not hope for me to kill!? How could they not expect it! The same for Otou-sama, surely... He wishes for me to become a full-fledged assassin, to eliminate the one who had killed him."

"What about you?"

"......Huh?"

"What do you think yourself, Eiri? Do you really want to become an assassin even if it means rolling around in suffering feelings? Do you really want to kill people that much? Put aside your family tradition, upbringing and what other people think. What do you truly think--"

"I really want to kill!"

The next instant, Eiri roared.

Then she spun around violently and glared at Kyousuke face to face--

"I want to erase the guy who killed Otou-sama! I want to take human lives! I wish to become a full-fledged assassin to meet everyone's expectations! I wish to live with my head up high as the main family's eldest daughter! I wish to become the family head, to protect everyone... To protect those who are precious to me. To achieve all this, I must kill... I have no choice but to kill! That's why, I--"

Eiri was just about to release all the words in her heart in one breath but stopped halfway and froze.

She went "...ah" and widened her eyes, staring at the other side of the darkness of the night.

The sound of wooden clogs could be heard on the asphalt.

The rural road passed through fields and extended straight. Someone was walking slowly along the road. Under the streetlights that were about to vanish, that person's ambiguous figure emerged--

"I see now. Then hurry up and finish the job, Nee-san."

"Kagura..."

The new arrival had rust-red eyes similar to Eiri's. Sharp eyes.

"...That girl, who is she?"

Enduring a gaze that almost seemed to pierce her, Eiri asked.

Kagura had not arrived alone. She had brought with her a girl they had never seen before.

Probably less than ten years old. Holding Kagura's hand, she was looking at Kyousuke and Eiri with incredulous eyes.

Kagura looked down at the girl and answered "This child..."

"She's lost. She came over to talk to me just as I was feeling bored then stuck to me. I think she's called Hina-chan or something."

"Kagura-neechan, who are they?"

The girl was dressed in a light yellow yukata. Pointing at Kyousuke and Eiri, she asked.

As though a different personality, Kagura replied with a gentle attitude.

"That's my older sister and her friend, Hina-chan."

"Eh, I see now!"

" "...?" "

The girl's curious gaze was making Kyousuke and Eiri exchange glances.

Eiri frowned and asked:

"S-Say... Why did you bring that child to this kind of place?"

"A stroll. I followed you and she ended up following me. Thinking it was perfect, I brought her along."

"Perfect?"

"Indeed. Perhaps she might come in handy."

--As soon as she finished.

Kagura raised her palm and struck the girl in the chest. The girl emitted a muffled scream then collapsed. Sprawled on the ground, she did not move again.

"You..." Eiri's expression changed with alarm.

"Kagura!? How could you do this to a child--"

"Make your decision."

"Huh?"

Kagura continued nonchalantly.

She first glanced at the unconscious girl then stared at the puzzled Eiri--

"To kill or not to kill this girl. Please decide right here and carry out your decision to the very end."

"......Huh?"

Two options were suddenly tossed out.

Next, Kagura revealed her ultimatum.

Taking out her metal fan from her sash, she pointed at Kyousuke who was standing before Eiri.

"By the way, if your decision is the latter--*I shall kill this boy*."

Scene 3 - Rusty and Rotten Nail / "Scarlet Scared The Sky"

August 14 (Wednesday) Cloudy

I spent today with Bob-chan and the tohers.

We chatted about many things.

The most memorable was about killing.

Bob-chan is too strong. I heard that she killed someone just because she hugged the one she liked. Auau...

Chihiro-chan loves meat too much. I heard that she ate three people within the blink of an eye.

(Chihiro-chan is very petite but has a massive appetite. She always feels hungry like her stomach's empty.)

Michirou-kun never told me directly, but according to what Bob-chan told me in private, he accidentally lost control and killed someone, then regretted it and blamed the demon (angel?) living in his arm.

Do people make excuses so that they won't get crushed by guilt? ...After listening to everyone's past, many poignant thoughts surfaced in my mind.

Scarlet Scared The Sky
錆び朽ちた爪
第三幕

8月14日（水）

今日もボブちゃんたちとすごしました。
そしていろんなお話をしました。
中でも1番心に残ってるのは殺人のことです。
ボブちゃんは力が強すぎて、好きな人に抱きついたら
絞め殺しちゃったらしいです。あうあう……。
千尋ちゃんはお肉が好きすぎて、
ペロリと3人たいらげちゃったらしいです
（千尋ちゃんは小さいのに食いしんぼうでいつもお腹をすかせています）。
ミチローくんは教えてくれませんでしたけど、
ボブちゃんからコッソリ聞いた話では、
どうやらカッとなって殺しちゃったのを、腕に宿っている
悪魔（天使？）のせいにしているらしいです。
そうでもしなくちゃ罪悪感でつぶされちゃうんじゃ
ないかなぁ……。みんなのお話を聞いて、
いろいろ考えさせられました。

"What did you just say? Kill... Kyousuke?"

"Indeed. If you can't kill this child, Nee-san, I will take this boy's life in exchange. Picking one out of two should be easy, right? Will you choose to take a stranger's life or are you going to let someone you know be killed? Select one of the two. Hurry and make your choice, Nee-san."

The sisters' conversation could be heard in this deserted rural road. The older sister, Eiri was dumbfounded, whereas the younger sister, Kagura, was aloof. Standing between the two of them, Kyousuke had no opportunity to interrupt, his gaze wandering back and forth.

Kagura's facial expression did not change the slightest, staring at Eiri like that.

"...Huh? What do you mean by that...? If I don't want Kyousuke to be killed, then I must immediately kill that child? Stop joking around... How could I possibly make such a choice!?"

"Is that so? Then this boy has to die."

"Stop joking around!"

"I have not the slightest intention of joking."

In contrast to Eiri's screaming, Kagura's attitude was completely unfazed.

Disregarding Eiri's reactions, she pressed on mercilessly.

"Do I look like I am joking? Regrettably, this was an order. An official mission assigned by Fuyou-sama. To find a chance to present before you a choice between the life of someone you value and someone irrelevant. That's that."

"Eh..."

Eiri was rendered speechless.

Kyousuke recalled bits and pieces of his impressions of Fuyou in his mind.

Eiri's mother had displayed cordial smiles in public but had secretly planned this conspiracy.

Like an assassin who never shows her weapon before taking a life, had she been hiding her mad thoughts without showing her true face the slightest?

"...Why is this happening? Why did Okaa-sama issue such an order--"

"This is all for you to succeed in killing. Nee-san, Fuyou-sama has always wished for this. You probably share her feelings as your own. There is no reason to hesitate, right? Hurry and kill. If you don't kill, this boy will be sent to hell. He'll be killed because of you. Let me be blunt, you can't escape... Will you end a life by your own hands or will you get someone killed indirectly by my doing? Currently, you only have these two paths to choose."

"...Must I choose?"

"You must choose. Didn't I explain already, Nee-san? This is actually a mission I was given by Fuyou-sama. For an assassin of the Akabane family, the head's orders are absolute... Running your mouth will be futile no matter what. I have no intention of heeding your nonsense. Blades are meant to be swung. The same goes for you, which you ought to understand clearly."

"----"

Silence. Gone pale in the face, Eiri looked at Kagura, Kyousuke then finally the collapsed girl.

She lowered her head, her lips pursed tightly.

"...I understand."

Agonizing after agonizing, Eiri finally looked up.

She threw away her water balloon and walked towards the target, the girl.

"You're right, Kagura... It's not like I can keep running away, right? Even if I can escape for the meantime, I can't escape my entire life."

"H-Hey--"

"Don't get in the way."

Kyousuke wanted to stop her and reached out to grab Eiri's wrist. Eiri glanced at him with partially lowered eyes. Her gaze was firm and resolute, filled with intense rejection.

"...This is my personal problem. You have no right to meddle. Think of it as I'm begging you, don't get in the way, Kyousuke--Don't get in my way."

"Eiri..."

She shook his hand off her wrist and walked past Kyousuke. As she went by, Kyousuke could hear her say "...sorry" in a voice barely audible to him.

Kagura shook her yukata sleeve and opened her fan.

"Nee-san is right. All you should do is pray on the side. Pray that you won't be losing your life. Mass murderer who has already killed twelve, for what reason have you stopped killing...? No need to worry, I will keep my promise. I won't harm a single hair of yours as long as Nee-san clears her shameful title of the Rusty Nail. Besides, it's not like I even want to touch you."

"--You're not deceiving me?"

Eiri came over to Kagura's side and looked into her eyes.

"Of course not," Kagura waved her fan and replied.

"Fuyou-sama issued only that one order to me. As long as you kill this girl for real, this boy can live, okay?"

"...Really? Very well."

Eiri nodded and turned her gaze down. Dressed in a light yellow yukata, the girl was lying sprawled on the ground, unconscious. Eiri knelt down beside her and flipped the girl's body over.

"Ugh--"

The girl made a sound.

An innocent face. Eyes closed. The girl's chest was heaving up and down slightly according to the rhythm of her breathing. Kagura's use of force seemed quite fine-tuned. The girl's face was very peaceful.

"Her name is Hina-chan... Right?"

Eiri reached to the girl in a timid manner. Taking care with her nails not to cut the girl, she caressed the girl's cheek. As though handling something fragile, she was cautious and gentle.

"What are you doing? Didn't I tell you to *kill* her--"

"Don't say anything more."

Her tone of voice sounded very calm yet forceful and commanding. Eiri gazed intently at the girl then shouted at Kagura, making her shrink back for a moment.

However, Kagura instantly went "...hmph" and lifted her fan to cover her mouth.

Eiri moved her hand from the girl and closed her eyes.

"I will kill now."

When Eiri opened her eyes again, her aura had changed completely.

Her cold voice carried no emotion at all. Even the wind stopped in fright.

Eiri's right hand lifted up slowly. Her index, middle and ring fingers were fitted with three blades in total, glinting coldly under the starlight.

Eiri aimed at a certain spot, the girl's pale throat.

Her carotid artery was completely unguarded. Aiming there, Eiri swung her fingernail blades without hesitation--

"Don't kill her."

Just as she was about to strike--

A voice suddenly rang out, causing Eiri's entire body to jump dramatically. Her hand stopped in midair and she looked at Kyousuke with eyes of recovered sanity.

Gradually, Eiri's face was dominated by anger.

"W-What are you doing...? Didn't I ask you not to interfere!?"

"Shut the hell up."

Kyousuke retorted back, causing Eiri to go "...mm" timidly.

"I know you don't want interference and I understand you really want to kill--But I refuse to comply. That girl must be killed to save me? Stop deluding yourself! If I stood back and watched her die without doing anything, then doesn't that make me a cold-blooded murderer too!?"

"Ah--"

Eiri put down her raised hand.

Kyousuke sighed and stared into those rust-red eyes...

"Sorry, but I'll do everything I can to prevent tragedy. Unfortunately, I'm not the kind of guy who listens obediently and watches from the side just because I'm afraid of dying. 'Only one person may live' that kind of nonsensical multiple choice, I will destroy it with my own hands!"

"Kyousuke......"

"--Curse you."

At this time, a low voice spoke

Kagura glared harshly at Kyousuke, her eyes conveying blazing fury.

"What are you interrupting for? You're just lowly scum, how dare you show off like that... You're the one who's nonsensical. Are you actually getting rehabilitated in that facility? Speaking such high-minded principles... Yet clearly you've killed twelve people, a murderer already."

"Wrong."

"Where am I wrong?"

"I haven't killed a single person. I'm just an ordinary person."

"......"

Kagura showed no immediate reaction. After a second of silence, she said:

"Huh? Is that really true? If that's the case, whatever, it makes no difference. Whether you're a murderer or not, I won't change my way of doing things. If you won't wait quietly on the weighing scales of human life, I'll simply make you half dead so that you can't even stand, then throw you onto the scales."

Kagura closed her metal fan and turned towards Kyousuke.

"Getting in the way of my mission is quite a heavy crime, you know? Even if you're untrained, I won't go easy on you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Bring it on! Didn't you say just now? Eiri has only two paths to choose. However--"

Kyousuke clenched his sweaty fist and gritted his trembling teeth. Removing his uncomfortable leather-soled sandals and standing barefoot, he smiled defiantly.

"There's actually one more path she could choose, right? If I defeat you instead, then Eiri won't need to make any choice."

".........Huh?"

Eiri stared wide-eyed, rooted to the spot

Kagura responded "--What are you talking about?" and narrowed her eyes.

"Are you serious? If that's the case, you are incurably stupid. There should be limits to self-delusion, right? Let me help you to realize your own level."

Her wooden clogs sounding against the ground, Kagura approached Kyousuke.

One step, two steps, three steps...

Kyousuke focused intently on her movements and readied his fist in a combat position.

Four steps, five steps, six steps, seven steps, in that instant--

--Kaching! With a sudden conspicuous sound, Kagura's figure vanished into thin air.

"Wha...!?"

In the next instant, the left side of Kyousuke's head was struck horizontally. The heavy blow was like getting struck by a metal bat at full speed. Even his skull shook. Kyousuke's body instantly tilted to the side.

"Ugh!?"

Then came another attack. The right side of his head was pummeled hard, forcing his head to tilt in the opposite direction. The hard sensation made it felt like it did not come from a human fist.

Seeing stars on the edges of his vision, Kyousuke caught sight of a silver-white curve flying madly at him.

"Gah!?"

A jab to his lower jaw as a follow up attack. The vibration reached his brain, blinding his vision in flash of white light. His consciousness was beginning to leave.

Staggering back unsteadily, Kyousuke fell on his ass.

Next to his feet, a pair of wooden clogs stood into position audibly.

Kagura looked down at Kyousuke in leisurely confidence.

"...Oh my? Didn't you say you were going to defeat me instead? To me, it looks like you can't even react fast enough."

Held in her right hand was the closed metal fan.

"Once I spread out the blades, you won't even know when you were cut, dying instantly, you know? The only reason you're alive is thanks to my mercy."

Saying that, Kagura waved the weapon in her hand.

Struck in the left cheek by the metal fan, Kyousuke was sent flying, rolling on the asphalt road.

"Kyousuke!?"

Eiri screamed. Kagura swung the blood that was sticking to the fan--

"--Nee-san. I am going to slaughter this boy now. If you wish to save his life, you'll have to kill that child over there, okay? I am using the back of the blade, yes, but it's still quite a hefty blunt weapon... If you dally any longer, it'll end up too late. Whether it boils down to me killing him faster or Nee-san killing that girl first--Come, let us have a contest with full presence of mind."

Kagura mocked while swinging her metal fan, aimed at the bridge of Kyousuke's nose.

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"Ku--"

With the attack arriving faster than his eyes could discern, Kyousuke dodged in the nick of time. When Kagura's deadly weapon struck the ground, he seized that moment to jump up and execute a grappling tackle in reckless abandon.

"Don't look down on meeeeeeeee!"

"So slow"

Kagura effortlessly evaded the tackle, slamming her metal fan into Kyousuke's right cheek just as she brushed past him. Once again, Kyousuke fell to the ground and Kagura stepped on the back of his head with her wooden clog.

"Do you think movements of that level could catch me? How ludicrous... Looks like you don't even have the basics of martial arts. A total amateur."

"Shut up!"

Kagura jeered and Kyousuke roared at her.

He mustered all his strength to lift his head and shook off Kagura's foot by force.

"...!?"

Losing balance, Kagura fell. Kyousuke swung a right straight as he stood up, but--

"I already said you're very slow."

Kagura nimbly dodged his fist and grabbed Kyousuke's hand. His right hand was immobilized between their crossed arms and the metal fan. Next--

"Guh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?'

--Twist. Kagura spun and slid behind Kyousuke's back. His joint bent backwards by the metal fan, Kyousuke screamed while his knees crashed towards the ground.

Securing Kyousuke's right arm, twisted behind his back, Kagura sighed.

"You're just swinging your fist like an idiot... It's truly astounding. Indeed, your strength is powerful, so this is what you'd call a total waste, right? Although I'm not that strong, if I make a move seriously--This is what happens."

"Gahhhhh!?"

As soon as Kagura exerted force, Kyousuke felt horrifying pain explode from his arm.

Seeing Kyousuke tormented, Eiri cried out "Kagura!" emotionally, but after crying out, she lowered her head in despair and switched to a feeble voice.

"...Stop now. I'm begging you, don't continue... Stop hurting Kyousuke. I will kill her... Definitely kill this child... I'm begging you."

"----Nee-san."

Kagura raised her eyebrow in displeasure and replied:

"Looks like you still haven't grasped the situation, have you? Right now, you should be killing, not begging me. If you want me to stop, hurry and kill her. It looks like I still need to give you a push. I won't release him, I'll break his arm!"

"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"Kyousuke--!?"

Kagura exerted her weight on the immobilized arm, adding force all at once.

Applying the metal fan to the joint, this type of joint technique could easily break mere human bone--Logically speaking.

"...!?"

However, she still could not break it in the end. Kyousuke's arm did not suffer any damage.

Confronted with abnormal physical resilience, Kagura was slightly surprised.

"Let gooooooooo!"

"Tsk--"

Taking the chance to struggle, Kyousuke successfully broke free.

Holding his aching arm, he faced off against Kagura and yelled at Eiri:

"Don't worry about me! Don't kill if you don't want to kill. I won't let her have her way for sure... Just focus on your own affairs!"

"K-Kyousuke--"

"Shut up!"

Kagura swung her metal fan to deliver a blow to Kyousuke.

Kyousuke caught the attack with his hand and shouted:

"Don't kill just because I will die! Don't kill just because of Kagura's threats! Ask yourself why do you have to kill!? Why must you take that child's life!?"

"T-That's because..."

"Because her family name is Akabane!"

Kagura answered for Eiri, stomping the ground while swinging her fan.

Kyousuke instantly raised his arm to block but the fan was aimed at his left flank. Crying out "gah!?", he lost balance. Kagura swung her fan at him in a frenzied flurry while speaking:

"Every generation of my family has made their living as assassins, a family of hereditary killers... Born in such a family, we were never humans to begin with. We are swords. Weapons, forged and honed repeatedly, born in this world for the sake of slicing people. To ask why a blade slices, that is ludicrous to the extreme! Swords are forged to kill. A sword that cannot kill has no value, right? Utterly lacking in meaning, right? Nee-san!"

"Kagura--"

"Screw this!"

Kyousuke skillfully dodged the flurry of fan strikes and punched, roaring angrily.

"You two are the same, you're humans, not swords! You should have human feelings! What Akabane, what ancestors, what environment, none of that matters, okay!? What do you think yourself!? You can't go back once you kill, you must think carefully--"

"What do you know!?"

Evading Kyousuke's uppercut that was transformed from a left hook, Kagura swung her fan. Counterattacked, Kyousuke was blown away.

"You've only known her for a few short months. A mere outsider, stop talking like you know everything! Nee-san and I have been honing killing techniques together ever since birth. Far more than you can imagine, we have endured harsh and horrifying training... Despite going through so much, what's with your current state, Nee-san!? Born to kill, raised to kill, for you to lack the ability to kill, what do you have left in the end!?"

Questioned harshly, Eiri's eyes went moist. Her gaze was wandering between Kyousuke, Kagura and the girl. Seeing her behavior, Kagura bit her lip.

Her hand holding the metal fan exerted more force. The frenzied flurry increased in intensity.

"You're not supposed to be so frail a person, right? More agile than any of us siblings, stronger than anyone, even winning praise transcending Fuyou-sama, how much longer are you going to act as a disgrace!? Please stop disappointing the Akabane... Please stop disappointing me."

"...Kagura?"

Somehow, her scolding turned in the helpless lamenting. Despite holding the upper hand in fighting, Kagura's expression looked extremely desperate, having lost her original calm.

Kagura's reaction prompted Eiri to act.

Clutching her fingernail blades before her chest, she gazed at hte girl's pale throat...

"Hey wait! Don't act rashly--"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up!?"

Kagura smacked Kyousuke's lower jaw with her palm.

"You know nothing about the Akabane, so stop running your mouth off!"

Kyousuke was shaken by the concussion as the metal fan continued to attack the side of his face. However, Kyousuke did not collapse. Gritting his teeth, he tried his hardest to steady his stance and unleashed a roundhouse kick as hard as he could.

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Gah--"

He managed the kick, but did not connect. Kyousuke's punches and kicks still could not hurt Kagura the slightest, but still, he continued to resist as hard as he could, refusing to give up on the fight.

"Yes, you are very right! I'm an ordinary person who was born and raised in normal society. I don't understand anything about you assassins and the underside of society! I don't even know much about your family background! But I know very well what it feels to be unable to deliver the killing blow!"

"Kyousuke..."

Eiri's eyes were wet with tears, her gaze wavering.

She had too much compassion for others, to the point of becomeing unable to kill--That being said, she had also said "I want to kill." Were those her true feelings? Were those her true thoughts? Was it a wish from the bottom of her heart?

Competitive, a show off, bad at expressing herself, a kind-hearted girl--Examples included when Kyousuke got ganged up by classmates, or toyed with by Syamaya or Renko, troubling over Ayaka... Now that he thought back, she was always such a caring and observant person.

In contrast, he seldom expressed his own feelings, intending to solve everything by his own strength.

He recalled the image of Eiri, trying to get away from the Bon Festival venue without saying a word.

Hence, Kyousuke--

"You're very afraid of killing, right? You don't want to kill, right? Saying 'I want to kill' when you clearly don't, what the heck is that!? Isn't that because you're always caring about other people day in and day out, ignoring your own feelings, are you planning to force yourself to shoulder everything alone!? You need to--"

"Shut up!"

Kagura hammered Kyousuke's temple with her metal fan. Although the skin broke and bled, Kyousuke did not care. Kyousuke kept staring at Eiri intently and yelled to her.

"You need to treasure yourself more, idiot! Cast the Akabane, Kagura and me aside, then confront your own feelings properly!!"

"...!?"

Kyousuke roared and swung his right arm as hard as he could.

Kagura did not dodge. Thus, Kyousuke's fist went straight for her flank--

In the next second, Kyousuke found himself flying in the air.

"--Huh?"

What was going on?

The fist that should have struck Kagura missed. By the time he noticed, he was spinning 180 degrees. Once his brain figured out he had been thrown, Kyousuke's left shoulder was already crashing towards farmland.

A splash of mud and water. Kyousuke's body was submerged in a sea of green.

The feeling of surprise greatly exceeded the pain. Spitting out mud that had entered his mouth, Kyousuke got up. Kagura looked down at Kyousuke from the rural road.

Their gaze met. Kyousuke felt a chill run along his back.

"Okay, this is the end..."

Kagura reached behind her back and drew out a second metal fan.

She spread both fans at the same time in her left and right. A metallic sound rang while silver-white flowers bloomed in the darkness of the night. The edges of the fans were polished smooth and sharp, giving off the luster unique to Japanese swords.

"It's totally annoying how durable you are. When on earth will you fall... You're like steel. Not human at all. However, the blades of the Akabane can even slice through metal. In other words, no matter how strong your body, it's futile--"

"Kagura!"

"......Nee-san."

Kagura turned her neck slowly and looked towards Eiri.

The side of her face was shrouded slightly in shadow.

"This is my final act of mercy. If you dare say you can't do it, I will slowly skin this boy alive, okay? Right before your eyes, I will kill him with a thousand cuts of slow torture. It doesn't matter to me which side you choose... Just pick the future you want."

"----"

Kagura forcing the issue mercilessly made Eiri gasp.

She looked towards Kagura but kept her lips pursed tightly. Kyousuke did not say a word. He had said everything he wanted. Next, it was up to Eiri to choose.

"I-I want..."

Eiri stared at the girl. The scene was shrouded by silence.

Only the sounds of frogs and insects could be heard. Mixed among the rustling of wind and leaves, the noise of the festival could be heard in the distance.

"......"

Finally, Eiri extended her hand at last.

Extending towards the girl's pale throat, she pressed the fingernail blade on the carotid and closed her eyes.

Then she said in a very very soft voice.

"Sorry."

Who was this apology directed towards?

The silently shut eyelids opened.

In the next instant--

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"......Sorry."

Eiri apologized again then withdrew her fingernail blade.

It was not a sideways slash. Withdrawing her finger from the girl's body, Eiri clutched the deadly weapon tightly in her bosom.

"Still can't... I can't do it."

Her legs gave way and she collapsed into a sitting position, her feeble voice sounding.

Kagura went "......Huh?" speechlessly.

"Y-You... what are you saying!?"

She snarled shrilly. Her calmness in declaring 'It doesn't matter to me which side you choose' had vanished without trace, her feelings totally clear for all to see--

"Just apply a bit more force and move your finger, that's all right!? It's something so minor, why can't you do it!? There should a limit no matter how little guts you have... Coward! Yellow belly! Incompetent! Useless! Count how many times it has been!? How much longer will you let yourself indulge in depravity, do you want to stay as the Rusty Nail--"

"I don't want to kill!"

Eiri interrupted Kagura's scolding sharply and responded with stirred emotions.

Tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

"It's not that I want to kill but can't... I can't kill because I don't want to! Hurting others is a painful thing, it's scary, I hate doing this kind of thing! I'd rather be a rusty sword my whole life instead! I don't care if others look down on me! That's right, I actually... I'm a coward, a yellow belly, someone incompetent and useless, a defective product that can't be fixed! That's the truth and I'm sorry... I'm truly sorry, Kagura... I am unable to kill this child. I don't want to... kill anyone."

"N-Nee-san--"

"Kyousuke is right... Having lived to this age, I've always been deceiving myself. I've been telling myself I must respond to everyone's hopes and pull myself together as the eldest daughter, not let Kagura get disappointed, and must avenge Otou-sama no matter what... But I just can't do it. I can't! No matter how much I deceive myself, I can't turn around the true feelings in my heart. I ignored the crying in my heart, pretending not to hear, not killing anyone, instead, burying my true self day after day, locking my soul away... I can't go on any longer... Sorry, Kagura. I have failed you, Okaa-sama. I am truly sorry... Otou-sama."

"...I can't believe this......"

Seeing Eiri sobbing while apologizing, Kagura lowered her metal fans limply.

Then for a while, Kagura seemed to slip into a trance completely.

Gritting her teeth hard, a growl drifted out from her tightly pursed lips.

"......Is that so, I see now."

Kagura slowly moved her neck and turned to look at Kyousuke. Vivid red irises, pitch-black pupils. Anger and hatred had turned into killing intent completely, focused on a certain meddling person.

"I understand now. In that case, I'll kill this boy. I'll cut up this scumbag alive who's responsible for Nee-san's downfall. I'll insert blades into the extremities of his four limbs and cut him open slowly, chopping him up into fine meat dust, quartering him, pulverizing him, turning him into human sashimi for you to taste in an extravagant display... Savor it carefully with your tongue. I'll have you realize how stupid a choice you have made. This boy's death, blood and flesh will serve as prescription to heal you properly."

Kagura declared mercilessly and started to walk.

Her arms were lowered by her side and her hands spun the two fans.

In the next instant--

"Stop--"

" "...!?" "

Kagura kicked the ground to approach when a red figure inserted itself between Kagura and Kyousuke.

Kagura widened her eyes and stopped her right arm that was swinging down. The metal fan stopped just as it struck the back of the neck of the interloper--Eiri.

Eiri had thrown herself over Kyousuke, hugging him tightly without letting go, protecting him with her body. Struck by the fan, her neck was bleeding. The fresh blood flowed down her snow-white skin.

Eiri's body, delicate and supple, was quivering this instant.

"E-Eiri--"

"You're in the way. Hurry and move aside."

Kagura lowered her fan and glared at Eiri's back.

"I can't attack with you guarding him. Stop making a futile struggle, immediately--"

"NOOOOOO!"

Eiri resolutely refused to let go, hugging Kyousuke tightly. Her tears fell one after another. Casting aside all reservations, she cried like a willful child.

"I won't! I'd rather die than move aside. Never ever ever--I won't move aside even half a step!"

"Y-You--"

Kagura's cold and merciless face reddened. She raised her metal fan high and roared at her in anger.

"Enough is enough, Nee-san!? This is so unseemly... If you won't move aside, I'll force you to move aside. Even if you really won't move aside, killing him is still easy as pie."

"We'll die together."

".........What?"

Eiri hugged insistently and looked back, glaring forcefully at Kagura.

"If Kyousuke dies, I'll die with him! Will you still kill him regardless!?"

"What are you saying--"

Kagura was dumbstruck.

"What are you talking about, such nonsense... This threat is too ludicrous! You can't even take another person's life, how would you commit suicide!? Don't make me laugh."

"I am not joking!"

"Don't give me that! If you dare to do it, show me right now, okay!? If you dare to take your own life, I don't mind letting this boy go."

"Got it."

"...........What?"

Eiri stood up and pressed her fingernail blade against her neck.

She exerted force through her fingertip without hesitation--

"Nee-san!?"

Instantly Kagura cast aside the metal fans in her hands and grabbed Eiri's arm in panic.

With her fingernail pulled away, a shallow wound could be seen beneath with blood seeping out.

Kagura went "...phew" in exhaustion then roared in anger with alarm on her face:

"You! What the heck are you trying to pull!?"

"I was going to commit suicide because you told me to--"

"Don't obey for real, okay!? Are you retarded!? You almost made m-my heart stop..."

"That sigh of relief was for me?"

"No, it was not!"

Kagura yelled then clicked her tongue.

Still holding Eiri's arm without releasing, she lowered her head.

From her lips came a feeble whisper.

"You said you didn't want to kill. What do you mean... What are you trying to say, Nee-san?"

Kagura's voice was turning into sobbing.

With her face turned to stare at the ground, she began to speak.

"In those past days, for the sake of killing, we've always trained our skills the whole time, haven't we? Day in and day out, gritting our teeth to endure harsh training, training nonstop... We were wandering on death's doorstep many times. But didn't we pull through with our efforts? Despite all that, now you say you 'don't want to kill'--"

"Sorry."

"What's the use of saying sorry!?"

Kagura scolded harshly and glared viciously at Eiri.

Her eyes were raised in anger with a faint glint of tears.

"Don't apologize to me! I don't want to see you like this... It's too unsightly. Crying, depressed, troubled, suffering... I don't want to see Nee-san like that at all! You're supposed to be stronger, more awe-inspiring, prouder, overcoming all hardship no matter how great, right!? Long long long ago, I've admired that kind of Nee-san... Watching you from behind, working hard with you as my goal to this very day."

"Kagura..."

"--The day Masato-sama passed away, do you still remember what happened?"

The "Masato-sama" mentioned by Kagura was probably their father who had died six years prior.

"I was seven back then, Nee-san, you were ten... I cried so sorrowfully and you said this to me, right? You said 'I will avenge him.' 'I will send to hell the one who killed Otou-sama, so don't cry.' That's what you told me. Hearing those words reassured me and gradually caused my sorrow and fear to subside in my heart. I thought 'Nee-san will surely accomplish it. She will kill him'... I believed firmly in my heart. But you--"

Kagura turned to face Eiri.

Letting go of Eiri's arm, she clutched the front of her yukata instead...

"But you said you can't kill! Forget about avenging Masato-sama! Even an ordinary person... I've never been that shocked. That feeling of betrayal. I was so angry inside. The figure I've been chasing after suddenly vanished, casting me to the side all alone, it felt so unsettling. I've always admired you, yet you fell from the clouds to the bottom of the abyss... I can't bear to watch."

"...Is that so?"

"That's the truth and it fills me with resentment."

Kagura bit her lower lip.

Holding the front of Eiri's yukata, she pulled her over by force and scolded her.

"I really hate you! I used to put you down with those nasty insults, but this time, I finally see you for what you are... I won't expect anything from you anymore. I won't expect you to do anything either. I won't ask for anything! If possible, I hope you'll try not to enter my view. Seeing you annoys me! From today onwards, don't get involved with me in any way."

"...Yes, I got it. If that's what you want me to do, Kagura, I'll comply."

Kagura's gaze was filled with raging emotions, glaring forcefully at Eiri who was smiling sadly.

Then pushing her away violently and letting go of her yukata, Kagura then picked up the fans she had dropped on the ground. Closing the opened fans and inserting them back into her sash, Kagura turned around and prepared to leave.

"I shall report back to Fuyou-sama, got that? What happens to you next has nothing to do with me... Prepare yourself for death."

After throwing vicious words out, Kagura started walking.

Someone spoke to her from behind--

"Don't go."

Kyousuke could not help but call her back.

"...Huh?" Kagura looked back impatiently.

"How can I help you?"

"I've got a question, do you truly hate Eiri?"

"More than anything."

Kagura answered without mercy.

However, Kyousuke did not back down.

"Just because Eiri can't kill? Oh right... Based on this, then your love for Eiri wasn't anything special in the first place."

"--What are you talking about?"

Killing intent surfaced in those rust-red eyes.

Kyousuke got up and took on her gaze fearlessly.

"I have a point, right? If you truly admired Eiri from the bottom of your heart, how could you hate her for something so minor? Your feelings are all just talk."

"......Huh?"

"W-Wait--"

"Lately, I also faced a similar predicament."

Kagura's aura was screaming murder and Eiri tried to intervene, but Kyousuke ignored them and continued:

"The predicament was actually about my little sister... Ayaka, who I always thought of as an ordinary girl, killing people without batting an eye. Compared to your situation, it happens to be the opposite, right?"

Back then, Ayaka had brought a shotgun, trying to kill Renko and the others.

Kyousuke still could not forget how great the shock he had felt inside. Realizing his sister was an unfathomable monster, he felt the distance between them widen all at once. However--

"...Even so, I still love Ayaka very much. Capable of killing, perhaps you might not be able to understand, I even found her terrifying at the time. However, no matter what, she's still my precious little sister. She's very important to me! Compared to fear and revulsion, my feelings of love are much... much stronger. I also know that she has many good points. Asking me to hate her is impossible."

"Kyousuke..."

"----"

Kagura continued to glare at Kyousuke without saying a word.

"Isn't it the same for you, Kagura? To be honest, you don't hate Eiri completely, right!? Despite your harsh words, you never had any intention to hurt Eiri... You're just acting cool on your own. From an observer like me, you don't really hate her, right? Your personality isn't upfront, just like your sister, right?"

"You have such a big mouth."

Kagura frowned in displeasure.

"You siblings have nothing to do with me. I couldn't care less. In other words, you're in no position to comment on me and my sister. Could you stop showing off that kind of know-it-all speech?"

"But--"

"There is no but. I've already said it. I hate Nee-san very much and totally despise her. I don't admire her nor find her important. That's all."

Kagura interrupted Kyousuke's objection and started to walk away.

Just as she wanted to leave the scene just like that--

"What a relief."

A voice came afar.

In front of Kagura, something flashed past instantly.

Only for an instant.

"...!?"

Kagura drew out her metal fan and swung it in the air.

--Clang! An acute sound was followed by a splash of something falling into the farmland. Kagura spread her metal fan and questioned in displeasure:

"...What is the meaning of this?"

"Nothing much."

From the other side of the darkness, a young man's flippant voice answered.

He revealed his identity--

"Seeing my little sisters acting so naively, I was thinking I should help out a bit? Festival time is over, now it's time for a blood bath."

The new arrival was a dandy dressed in a scarlet hakama with a rouge haori.

Playing with a weapon resembling a shuriken in his hand, Akabane Basara grinned frivolously.

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"...You're calling me naive?"

Kagura's voice was mixed with hostility.

Basara's grin deepened. He shrugged.

"Yes. The eldest daughter failed to kill again and even said stupid words like 'I don't want to kill' and the second daughter decides immediately to let her off. Don't you find these two so naive it's nauseating?"

"No."

Kagura refuted Basara's question immediately and waved the metal fan in her hand.

"What else could I do? If I killed the boy, she was going to die together and almost succeeded in committing suicide. Apart from backing off, what could I--"

"Then you could let her die."

"--What?"

"Let her die if that's what she wants. That's not your problem. Didn't Fuyou-sama issue the order? I remember it was 'Let her make a choice between Kyousuke-kun's life versus someone else's.' Suppose Eiri chose the latter, then you should follow the order and kill the former. If that results in Eiri's death, I believe it's simply unavoidable."

"......Hmm."

Kagura paused.

Mercilessly, Basara emphasized repeatedly.

"Didn't you yourself say all this? You hate Eiri and what happens next to her has nothing to do with you. If Eiri decides to harm herself, it shouldn't matter, right?"

"T-That's because--"

Kagura looked away from Basara--

"You have a point but Nee-san's abilities are bona fide... It would be a great loss to the Akabane to lose talent in this manner--"

"There won't be a problem. A rusted sword has no value to speak of."

Kagura stammered a rebuttal but was cut off by Basara in a second.

"B-But... How to deal with Nee-san is not for us to decide. We should wait for Fuyou-sama's decision, right?"

"Yes. Indeed, we just follow orders. So like I said, carrying out the order is the top priority. Kyousuke-kun needs to be killed as ordered by Fuyou-sama. If Eiri loses her life as a result, we'll just have to see when it happens. Whether or not to swing the sword isn't a decision for us swords to make, right?"

"----"

Kagura closed her mouth and lowered the metal fan readied in her hand.

Basara nodded with satisfaction and looked at Eiri.

"...So that's that. Sorry? Then I will take Kyousuke-kun's life in Kagura's place. If you want to kill yourself, be my guest."

Basraa smiled at Eiri and looked at her wounded throat.

Eiri shifted to a spot where she could protect Kyousuke and spread her hands in a guarding stance.

"I won't let you succeed. I absolutely won't let you kill Kyousuke!"

"Eiri..."

"Haha." Basara burst out into laughter.

"Looks like you really love him! I'm filled with such mixed feelings as your older brother... Hmm, not bad. If he's that important to you, I'm sure his death will be a great blow. I am quite confident in my ability to obliterate things completely."

The copper eyes narrowed to capture Kyousuke's figure.

"Having precious things utterly obliterated before their eyes tends to crush people's souls. When even the soul is destroyed, the mind won't have unnecessary thoughts anymore... To become a tool that can kill without hesitation. If the damage is too great and the tool becomes unusable, just throw it away."

"N-Nii-san..."

"Bastard!"

Kyousuke roared in anger while Basara's lips curled in a grin.

"Hmph, don't get so worked up, Kyousuke-kun. When blood rushes to your head, your judgment goes down. Small fries lose composure especially easily."

"Shut up! Stop running your mouth--"

Just as Kyousuke wanted to push Eiri aside and step forward, Basara swung his arm nonchalantly. In the next instant, something brushed past Kyousuke's left cheek. Kyousuke touched his cheek with his hand and instantly felt the stickiness of blood. A moment's delay later, the pain surged.

He looked closer and saw that the shuriken had disappeared from Basara's hand.

The black blade had melded into the darkness, flown towards Kyousuke and cut his skin.

"...If you keep making a fuss, I'll cut open your throat, okay? Apart from that three-bladed shuriken just now, my blades--the throwing knives the "Night Severing Crows"--come in many different styles. One false move and I'll instantly turn your into shredded flesh."

"Kuh--"

"Nii-san!"

Pushing back Kyousuke who was gnashing his teeth, Eiri spoke with rage.

"Stop it now! If you don't stop and continue to hurt Kyousuke.."

"Haha. Then what? Will you kill me?"

"No. But I'll put you on death's door."

Eiri displayed her hands' fingernails.

The tips of her feet were also fitted with hidden weapons--Readying her sixteen blades, Eiri entered battle mode.

"Oh? ...Now this is interesting. However, the one I'm going to kill isn't you, Eiri? My target has only been Kyousuke-kun from the start. My knives have long range, mid range, close range and point blank range, covering all ranges of attack. As soon as you enter my strike zone, I will immediately kill Kyousuke-kun... Who do you think is faster? No matter how good you are, you can't move faster than projectile weapons, right?"

"....."

"Your 'Scarlet Slicing' is unsuitable for defense. It's a concealed weapon specialized for attack. If you're lucky, you could force a draw at best? As soon as your blade touches me, left over there, Kyousuke-kun's blood will splatter."

"T-That kind of outcome... Who knows unless I try."

Eiri responded firmly but her voice was quite stiff. Her fingers were also trembling

To force her way to victory would require hoping for Kyousuke to take care of himself and evade Basara's blades...

"Right, let me tell you by the way. The Night Severing Crows can be fired in multiple, you know? I only threw one just now, but I'd like to try eight this time. Multiply that by three and that's the number of blades."

" "...!?" "

One was hard enough to dodge already. That many of them would surely be impossible to evade. Kyousuke and Eiri were plunged into despair while Basara crossed his arms before his chest. Reaching his hands into his sleeves, he prepared to launch his knives.

Next--

"Okay, time for slaughter? Fly, Night Severing Crows."

Basara drew out his arms.

A large number of deadly weapons flew across the night. Having sprung into action a step earlier, Eiri spun and pushed Kyousuke away.

".........Huh?"

Kyousuke was shocked while Eiri showed a dreamy smile before his eyes.

Her lips were saying 'sorry' to him.

The view tilted slowly.

Kyousuke could see clearly, right before his eyes--

The flying Japanese blades were dense like rain, descending, slicing through the darkness, going to put Eiri into a blood bath of shredded human flesh from head to foot.

"Dance, Red Bird."

An instant before that would happen--

A shadow suddenly rushed forth to perform a spectacular blade dance.

A symphony of weapons clashing acutely was played.

Under the starry sky, the fans' surfaces fluttered like wings.

" " ".........Huh?" " "

Someone was shocked in addition to Kyousuke and Eiri.

Basara was staring dumbstruck at the interloper, looking at the girl who had blocked all the launched blades with a pair of metal fans.

"Kagura? Why--"

"Dunno."

Kagura replied with hostility then lowered her fans.

"This body moved on its own. I am definitely angry, Nee-san... But looks like I don't want you to die."

"Huh?"

"...Sorry."

Kagura apologized very quietly. With her back to Eiri, she said:

"When I found out you couldn't kill, I acted out to vent, then all the time after that... Perhaps I've been deceiving myself. Pretending I really hated you and despised you. Pretending I no longer admired, no longer seeing you as important... Perhaps I've been putting on a front the whole time, maybe."

Kagura recounted. It was almost like the scene when Eiri said for the first time, "I don't want to kill"--Kagura had done the same. She confessed her true feelings that she had kept buried deep in her heart all these years.

"I originally wanted to apologize to you straight away. I thought the first failure was just coincidence. As long as you succeeded the second time, I was going to apologize to you. But you couldn't do the deed... Then a third and fourth time, I took each opportunity to insult you, losing my chance to apologize... I never had a chance to treat you properly, and like this, six years went by."

"Kagura..."

"Can I ask you a question?"

Kagura turned to look at Eiri.

In a nervous voice, she asked:

"Killing is a taboo to you, right? Someone like me who can kill calmly, umm... How do you feel? Would you hate me--"

"Idiot. How could that be possible?"

"Huh?"

"I've always loved you ever since you were born and treasured you. That goes without saying, right? Kagura, you are my adorable little sister."

"Nee-san--"

Kagura widened her eyes.

Instantly, she looked down as though holding something in--

"I see now. Thank you... I'm very sorry for earlier. I do love Nee-san very much after all. I love the kind-hearted Nee-san who can't take human lives."

Kagura gradually smiled while speaking choppily. It was the first time for Kyousuke to see Kagura smile after visiting the Akabane home.

--Clap clap clap clap clap clap.

Someone applauded at this time.

Kagura's expression instantly tensed.

Spreading his hands that had been clapping, Basara offered his comments in an exaggerated tone.

"Oh my? Congratulations for making up, you two! Onii-chan is so touched... After all, you two sisters have been fighting for as long as six years, right? How unexpected, to watch a touching scene! My soul feels cleansed. Congrats, congrats. Let's not kill Kyousuke-kun and all go home happily--Yeah right, how can something so retarded happen?"

Instantly, his smile disappeared completely.

The flippant mood remained but merciless light glinted in his eyes--

"Come on, you girls... Aren't you too naive? What a disgrace to the mighty name of the Akabane for the main family's eldest and second daughters to be like this. Looks like I'll have to re-educate you two as the eldest son? Kyousuke-kun will be slaughtered according to the original plan while Eiri and Kagura will be put in their place anew. Let Onii-chan fix those dull minds of you sisters."

Basara crossed his arms swiftly, grabbing the hidden weapons in his sleeves.

Kagura went "...hmph" and raised her metal fans.

"That depends on whether you'll be able to kill. Watch out or you'll eat a few blades from me, Nii-san--"

"Stand back."

Pushing back the forceful Kagura, Eiri walked up. Kagura asked "...Nee-san?" in surprise while Eiri smiled at her.

"I'll handle this alone. Kagura, could you help take care of Kyousuke?"

"Eh!? Hey Eiri..."

"Understood."

--Will this be okay? Before Kyousuke could ask, Kagura had already nodded.

"I won't let this boy come to the slightest harm. Don't worry about us and focus on the fight."

"Yes, thank you."

"...Oh? How very confident. Indeed, your abilities are quite outstanding among us Akabane. However, what a shame--"

Basara's killing intent was overwhelming.

"While you were rusting and rotting away, I've been working the whole time. A whole eight years. I've slaughtered countless people, drinking no lack of fresh blood for eight years... My blade has been forged and honed on death's doorstep. Are you deluding yourself to think you can defeat me when you can't even kill a single person? Haha--That's rich, hey!?"

While jeering, Basara swung his arm.

Sharp blades with speed rivaling bullets came rushing forth, faster than the naked eye could see. Quantity, trajectory, angle, direction, none could be discerned, under the night's cover, invisible weapons had formed a rain of blades, attacking from all directions. Confronted with all this, Eiri--

"...Yawn."

--Eiri approached Basara, evading the attack while yawning.

With tilt of her head, waving that ponytail, sometimes stooping, sometimes leaning back or lifting her sleeve, changing her pace, turning around then walking on the ground, her wooden clogs sounding.

With fluid motions, Eiri controlled her slender body, moving every joint from head to foot with perfection, passing through the rain of blades deftly.

"Gah... Are you looking down on me, Rusty Nail!?"

Basara roared desperately and unleashed a second and a third wave of attacks, but the results were the same. Basara shot out blades like firing a shotgun but could not even touch a hair of Eiri's--

"--Huh?"

--And even scattered some towards Kyousuke at the back, who was watching in disbelief. However, Kagura fluttered her metal fans with lightning speed and deflected the projectiles in time. The flash of blades was like a dance, shining brightly whenever blades clashed.

Together, the sisters were playing an unbelievable melody of impressive skill.

However, Basara was no pushover either.

"Peck, Flamingo."

After firing knives from his right sleeve, a red chain-sickle instantly emerged from his left sleeve. That deadly blade traced a circular curve and aimed for the enemy's head. Eiri reacted swiftly and ducked in time.

Faster than one could narrate, Basara pulled the chain. The sweeping blade returned and attacked Eiri from out of sight. Basara then pulled out another chain-sickle to execute a pincer attack against Eiri. His light-pink lips curled into the shape of a crescent moon.

"Ha! It's over for you--"

"Too slow."

In the next instant, Eiri exploded.

Even Kyousuke watching from a distance was no exception, her speed was faster than he could catch. Instantly, Eiri entered Basara's blind spot and accelerated rapidly from there. With lightning speed, she closed in on Basara--

"Damn it, hurry and return--"

"Sever, Scarlet Slicing."

Before Basara could bring out new weapons, Eiri's right hand's fingernails had swept upwards from between his legs to his head, slicing straight up.

Then the left arm, right leg, left leg, right arm--Four attacks were unleashed in an instant.

"...!?"

The flash of blades brushed past him at close range, forcing Basara to fall on his ass.

His sleeves and hem were filled with cuts. From there, shurikens, chakrams, kunai, double-edged blades and other concealed weapons fell out one after another.

Looking down at the dumbfounded Basara, Eiri tossed her hair.

"This is my victory, isn't it, Nii-san?"

"H-Haha... I-I guess. Looks like you won--Yeah right!?"

Using his mouth like a blow dart tube, he launched an extremely tiny blade. Eiri tilted her head to dodge then kicked Basara's face with her wooden clog.

"Goff!?"

"Stop struggling in vain. It's useless."

"Wing spread--"

"Like I said, it's useless."

"Geh!?"

Stepping hard on Basara's face, Eiri smiled tenderly.

"It's my victory, isn't it, Nii-san?"

"......I admit defeat."

Looking like he finally gave up resisting, Basara answered in a powerless voice.

Eiri exhaled with an annoyed expression and moved her foot away from Basara's face. Feeling like he was in a dream, Kyousuke watched her figure in shock.

"S-She's crazy strong... I didn't know she was that strong?"

"That goes without saying."

Kagura put away her fans and puffed out her chest in pride.

"Nee-san is a genius, but she's too kind-hearted. Her flaw is that she'll hold back subconsciously... But she's that strong when she's serious. No one can defeat her."

Kagura's expression was quite cheerful when speaking, as though she were a different person from before.

Squinting, as though looking at something dazzling, Kagura kept staring at Eiri.

"...By the way, how do we handle this? Just to be safe, Nii-san should be tied up--"

"Ahhh!? There, found the escapee! Come, hurry and come!"

Eiri was interrupted by a sudden wave of noise.

Renko, Ayaka and Busujima hurried onto the scene.

"Oh thank goodness! I was so worried... I got too serious in dancing at the Bon Festival and by the time I realized, someone had gone missing. I almost let you two run off... Eh, weird? It looks like there was a big scene, don't tell me the deed is done?"

"Yes, the deed is done. While you were dancing obliviously, we went through a load of hell--"

"T-T-T-T-T-The deed is done~~~!? And a load you say, what's going on!? Please share with me all the juicy details!? Shuko--!"

"Ayaka found it weird that Onii-chan did not come back for so long, so Ayaka went to report to the teacher. It turns out you two were doing it out in the wild... Don't you know that there are things that can and cannot be done, Eiri-san--!?"

"Huh!? Fools, that's not what happened!?"

Interrogated by Renko and Ayaka, Eiri retorted awkwardly.

"Nii-san was trying to attack Kyousuke, which is why I joined forces with Kagura to fend him off! He'd be dead if we hadn't stopped Nii-san. You should be saying thanks instead, right!?"

" "-----" "

Renko and Ayaka froze for a moment, staring at Basara who was lying on the ground.

With a cheerful expression, Basara called out "Hi, Renko-chan!" and spread his arms.

"Seriously, that Eiri is too mean! She beat me up with an inhumanly cold heart. Please comfort me with your set of massive jugs, Renko-chan?"

"Go to hell, homo."

Renko kicked Basara, sending him flying. Unsure what had happened, Basara stared wide-eyed. Ayaka gave him a flying kick.

"Don't make a move on Onii-chan, homo."

"Ehhh!? You've got the wrong idea... I'm very normal, I only like girls-- Uwahhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Although Basara desperately insisted on his innocence, Renko and Ayaka did not listen to him at all.

The girls either kicked with their wooden clogs or cursed him in rage, totally tearing Basara up.

"If you dare make a move on Kyousuke, prepare yourself to be killed by me, okayyyyyyyy!?"

"So that you don't dare get funny ideas again, Ayaka will crush your crotch!"

"The way I see it, you should just go die already!"

"Insulting Nee-san is a serious crime. Your body needs to remember this, Basara-niisan!"

Eiri and Kagura joined in to beat him up. Soon after, Basara was lying there without moving. Kyousuke ran over to have a look and saw that his eyes had rolled over and he was unconscious.

"P-Poor guy..."

"Nothing much, he brought it on himself."

Eiri remarked coldly then looked at Kyousuke. She reached out to touch his wounded cheek and stroked slowly.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're okay... Thank goodness."

"Eiri--"

"It's too soon to relax, Nee-san."

Kagura interrupted. Glancing at the unconscious Basara whom Renko and Ayaka was still kicking in a frenzy, she said with a solemn expression.

"How do you intend to explain this incident when Fuyou-sama asks? If you're lucky, you might end up exiled... Otherwise, you might get beheaded on the spot. You'd best prepare yourself."

× × ×

"......So that was what transpired."

The location was the Akabane reception hall. After returning from the Bon Dance Festival, Kyousuke and company had gone to treat their wounds, bathed, took a breather then gone to Fuyou to explain the whole story in detail.

Kyousuke and Eiri were sitting side by side in front of Fuyou. Behind them sat Renko, Ayaka and Busujima. Kagura and Basara were waiting on Fuyou's left and right respectively.

"'Don't want to kill' instead of 'can't kill'... In other words, you have no wish to become an assassin and don't plan on succeeding to the Akabane main family--Is the above what you wish to say, Eiri?"

"......Y-Yes."

"Understood."

Fuyou nodded then took a sip of green tea. Then she remained silent.

"Excuse me, Fuyou-sama... Given what Nee-san has done, could you forgive her? I know you harbor hopes for Nee-san and it's inevitable you're disappointed, but, umm... If Nee-san doesn't want to kill, then no amount of forcing will come to bear fruit..."

"----"

"Fuyou-sama!"

Seeing Fuyou without any reaction, Kagura stood up.

Leaving her seat cushion, she leaned forward to look straight at Fuyou's face--

"I will work hard for Nee-san's share! I will hone my skills and surpass Nee-san, to reassure you that you can leave the family business to me, to become the best assassin! So... So please. Please forgive Nee-san! I won't shamelessly beg you to maintain the mother-daughter relationship. But if nothing else, please show mercy on imposing physical punishment and putting her to death--"

"What are you talking about?"

Fuyou opened her closed eyes. Those blood-red eyes stared at Kagura--

"How could I possibly impose that kind of punishment?"

".........Huh?"

Fuyou smiled radiantly, putting Kagura in puzzlement.

Then she turned to look at Eiri and announced in her usual tone of voice.

"I understand, Eiri. If you truly do not wish to kill, I shan't coerce you anymore. I won't force you to inherit the family business either. You will go forth and explore what you want to do and how you wish to live your life."

" " "........Eh?" " "

Inside the hall, everyone showed expressions of disbelief. Eiri was tense the whole time. This sudden development blanked out her mind.

After a while, Eiri recovered from shock and asked timidly:

"U-Umm... By saying that, specifically... What do you mean?"

"Literally what I said, what else? You don't have to kill anymore. It's fine if you don't succeed the Akabane main family. That being said, I have no intention of disowning you."

"...Eh? No, but... umm, Okaa-sama? Then I won't be able to become an assassin? Why won't you abandon me even though I clearly can't become one!? Useless defective goods like me--"

"Eiri."

Fuyou spoke her name in a reprimanding tone.

From her red lips, almost blood-stained in color like her eyes, she let loose a sigh.

"Do know that you are the precious daughter I gave birth to while enduring all the pains of childbirth. To ask me to abandon my own daughter... Don't make such a joke. Indeed, the Akabane is a family of assassins and all children go through an elite education on murder after they are born, so as to cultivate them into future assassins. However... It would be too extreme to think that children who cannot become assassins are useless and not needed."

"...Yes. But Okaa-sama, you've been trying all ways to force me to kill--"

"That was because you hoped to kill."

"Huh?"

"Eiri, you said those words before, didn't you? Wanting to kill but could not. That was why I used all manner of methods to spur you to kill. Enrolling you in the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation is also for the same purpose. Through interactions with murderers of the same age, perhaps it might have a stimulating effect... That was what I thought. If you don't want to kill, I have no intention of forcing you."

"Okaa-sama--"

After learning Fuyou's true thoughts, Eiri was rendered dumbstruck. She had thought her mother was filled with malice, but all she wanted to do was make her child's wish come true.

For an instant, her sense of values seemed quite correct.

However--

"...Ordering people to kill Kyousuke, was that to make me kill successfully too? As long as I am able to kill, other people's lives don't matter?"

"Indeed."

Confronted with Eiri's question, Fuyou answered without a second thought.

"After all, with assassination as a career... There are priorities and considerations. When necessary, you must take lives without hesitation."

She asserted with full confidence and from that, one could tell her system of values had fundamental differences with normal society. Rather than insane words, they stemmed from a difference in nature. To Fuyou, killing was perhaps just a "means."

The brakes, known as common sense of normal morals and ethics, never existed to begin with.

"However, switching the target to Kyousuke-san... That included elements of the fact that you cannot be deemed a total outsider. After all, you might end up as Eiri's partner in the future--You might become a member of our Akabane family, you know? I wouldn't go so far as to send someone to kill you just to force Eiri to kill."

" ".......Huh?" "

Kyousuke and Eiri were rendered speechless after hearing her words.

Fuyou giggled "fufu" and covered her mouth.

"Why do you think the Akabane developed into a prestigious family of assassins? The elite education imposed once a child acquires cognition? The system of assassination techniques that has been refined and honed to its essence? Or the method of forging jeweled steel that has been passed down through the generations? Nay--Rather, it's because of *bloodline*."

Fuyou smiled. A red line suddenly appeared on her right cheek.

From the wound, viscous blood flowed out.

"This is a bloodline of assassins, carefully cultivated over twenty-nine generations. Finding people with equally excellent potential to marry, utterly ruling out those without promise, depending on the situation, even choosing to marry relatives, the purest genes for murder has been selected throughout the whole journey. Poor quality steel can only produce inferior blades no matter how much you hammer them... Conversely, Akabane blades are all forged from jeweled steel of high purity. Trenchant blades boasting of outstanding properties. Compared to sloppily made knives that fill the market, therein lies the key."

With an aura of arrogance, Fuyou was looking precisely at Busujima.

What the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation as doing was taking convicted murderers of varying quality to raise as killers, claiming them for reuse, a type of low-quality mass production--That was what her words seemed to be satirizing.

As one of the teachers there, Busujima made a polite smile as though he did not know how to react.

Ignoring the bleeding on her cheek, Fuyou then said: "Precisely because of that..."

"The children's partners must be carefully selected. The other side's bloodline--Their genes, was there value in joining the Akabane family in matrimony? Will something with impurities be born? One must assess and judge beforehand. Precisely because of that, I ordered to have him tested. Will Kyousuke-san survive an attack from my children? Should he lose his life in an attack of this level, he would not be someone needed by the Akabane."

Kyousuke instantly went totally pale.

While showing a smile that made her seem like she would not hurt a fly, Fuyou was loftily making shocking statements.

"However, you survived... This means that you have successfully passed the trial to become Eiri's husband, you know? What a joyous occasion. Naturally blessed, literally, to the point that it's only natural that the school had to get their hands on you even if it meant framing you with false charges. Inviting you here turned out to be the correct decision. Fufu. We welcome you greatly and you have permission to marry Eiri any time. What do you say, Kyousuke-san?"

"H-Haha..."

"Hold on a sec."

Just as Kyousuke was smiling stiffly, Basara, who had not said anything so far, interrupted. Twisting his bruised face, he glared at Kyousuke--

"He definitely survived, but it wasn't by his own power, right? Others kept protecting him after I got on the scene... It would be too sloppy if you approve him just like that. The way I see it, I'd better test him again--"

"Stop."

Seeing Basara reach into his sleeve and get up, Fuyou called to stop him.

Instantly, Basara halted. Halfway in getting up, he froze. On his forehead, left cheek, right eye's corner and tip of the nose, shallow cuts appeared, bleeding with tiny trails.

In a calm voice, Fuyou scolded:

"I have already approved of him, Basara. Hold your tongue."

"......M-My apologizes."

"Taking action without my orders, do not do that ever again. Understood?"

"...Yes."

After listening to Basara's answer, Fuyou moved her left hand's ring finger and right hand's middle finger.

Basara instantly collapsed and sat down on the spot.

"I apologize for my children... However, please rest assured everyone. I will not let anyone harm you. Inside this house, my blades stand ready in every corner. I will instantly notice any suspicious activity as soon as it starts and shred the threat with but a movement of my finger."

"Eh--"

Someone involuntarily looked around the room but could not see anything resembling weapons.

Eiri said to him: "Don't bother."

"Okaa-sama's weapon--the steel wire blade 'Silk Network' is as fine as hair. You can't find it unless you get very near and observe closely. Apart from that, it's sharpness is top-notch."

"...No way."

How could anyone defend against something like that? This kind of steel wire was probably what had cut Fuyou's cheek and wounded Basara just now. One could almost say she could slice at will.

--A fitting description, its other name was the Crimson Cradle.

An invisible blade that could be controlled at will, instantly shredding the target into pieces of meat. As expected of the Akabane main family's head, she was definitely a top-class assassin.

Even Busujima trembled and said: "...I really hope I'll never become her enemy."

A smile bloomed on Fuyou's face as she reached for her teacup.

"Fufu. Keeping the enemy oblivious is the first rule of assassination, isn't it? The target should be dead by the time he notices. Once the Akabane shows their blade, no one can escape death."

Finishing her tea, Fuyou quietly lowered her eyes.

While savoring the tea fragrance, she allowed her thoughts to wander...

"That being said, my husband prevailed ten times. He was working as a bodyguard and our relationship was like mortal enemies... Whenever we ran into each other, there would be conflict. By the time I noticed, he had already stolen my heart, fufu."

...Somehow, Kyousuke felt like he had heard a similar plot somewhere.

Behind Kyousuke, Renko and Ayaka chattered. "...That's the prototype for *The Assassin's Love*, right?" "Maybe they're just similar in concept." "Like mother, like daughter, after all." "They're seriously mother and daughter. Kusukusu." Ignoring them, Fuyou continued to reminisce.

"In the beginning, he would reject me stubbornly. But finally giving in to my relentless attacks--passion--he finally agreed to marry into my family. He was dyed red from head to foot by my beloved blade's slicing. Accepting the Akabane family's secure imprisonment--warm welcome--he proposed and had his heart stolen, finally marrying with me. Masato-sama was truly a tsundere, always putting on a brave face and never upfront, I suppose? Fufufu."

" "........." "

For almost an hour after that, Fuyou kept talking about her husband.

No outsider could tell what Fuyou actually thought, but rather than a woman in love, she seemed more like a depraved stalker. The desperately resisting father (tsun) gradually lost the strength to oppose the relentless violence (dere). This process seemed more like abuse than romance.

Even so, the tormented father still loved his children and showered them with abundant love. Speaking of which--

"Eiri, your father was actually very worried about you... About your future. He believed that you are too kind-hearted and not suited to killing. Hence, he asked me to set you free if you ever admit on your own accord that you wish to walk a different path from assassination... That was what he said. Although I never told you this whole time, those were your father's last words."

"Yawn... Eh?"

Eiri had been bored by Fuyou's reminiscences, but now forced her yawn back.

Looking like she did not know how to react, she asked:

"O-Otou-sama's... final, words?"

"Indeed. Six years ago, on previous night before he went on his final mission, he was worrying about his daughter who was about to start along the path of assassination. I never figured your reason for forcing yourself to be an assassin even at the cost of burying your true feelings, but Eiri... Your father was not obsessed with hoping for you to become a competent assassin. Even if you failed, he would not feel disappointed. He surely won't be happy to see you go avenge him... So that is the truth, Eiri. Even if you cannot kill, there is no need to feel that you have failed your father."

"...!?"

Hearing what Fuyou said, Eiri's eyes suddenly widened. Then she covered her mouth with her hands.

Her rust-red eyes grew more and more moist--

"Ooh--"

Ever since admitting her true feelings to Kagura and Fuyou, there were still some emotions stuck in the bottom of her heart. These feelings surged forth all at once now, like a ruptured dam, making her cry.

With her hands covering her face, the tears kept flowing.

Kagura called out "Nee-san..." sadly while Fuyou went "Oh dear..." and smiled. Basara snorted "...Hmph" then Renko sighed "shuko--..."

Kyousuke felt Ayaka poke his back and say "Onii-chan" then he carefully reached for Eiri's back and stroked gently.

After consoling her for a while, Kyousuke could not help but smile.

The Bon Festival was the day when ancestors returned. It was probably the same for Eiri's father. Perhaps he was somewhere, watching over his daughter with a reassured smiled on his face.

Closing Scene - Outroduction

"...Seriously, is it okay?"

Another two passed after the Bon Festival commotion and it was noon. Kyousuke and company were in front of the Akabane home's main entrance, preparing for their return journey. On this parting occasion, Eiri nodded firmly to Fuyou's question and said:

"Yes, Okaa-sama."

"I see... Fufu. Very well. After all, it is your own decision, Eiri."

--Her withdrawal from the Purgatorium School of Rehabilitation.

Eiri had had chosen the path of not killing, so this was Fuyou's suggestion to her.

As for how Eiri came to be enrolled, it was achieved by Fuyou paying tuition fees to the school. Since that was different from other students, she apparently could choose to leave.

Since there was no need for her to kill, naturally, she was not obliged to keep studying at a school for killers. That being said, Eiri's reply was "No." Because she said she wanted to graduate with everyone else.

Furthermore--

'I have someone I must protect no matter what.'

--She even said that. Firm and unwavering.

Someone had objected fiercely, namely, Eiri's little sister Kagura. Starting from yesterday morning, until noon today, she had been trying all manner of ways to convince her older sister. Just as Kyousuke thought it was time for her to give up...

"Nee-san, you must take better care of your health, okay? Apart from not getting injured, be careful of flu and the like... If those trash bastards try to touch you or say retarded stuff, remember to tell me. I'll turn them all into minced meat! That homeroom teacher who's rumored to be planning to make a move on you will be turned into minced tuna with onions. Speaking of which, the food sucks there... The Akabane should exert pressure and ask them to change Nee-san's menu, right? Also, also--"

"You're worrying too much."

"Ow!? ...That hurts."

Suffering a chop on the head, Kagura glared angrily at Eiri.

Ever since making up with Eiri, this was how Kagura acted. Perhaps she wanted to make up for the days when she acted contrary to her true feelings, she now seemed like a different person.

"Kusukusu. What a hopeless siscon. Trash Kagura, it's gross."

"You have no right to call me that, shitty Ayaka. Do you want me to gouge out your internal organs?"

"Hey hey..."

Seeing Ayaka and Kagura arguing viciously, Kyousuke was exasperated.

The situation did not improve ever since those two met. It looks like it was going to take a long time before the two girls got along--Just as he thought that, Kagura glanced at him--

"What are you going hey for? Pull yourself together too."

"Huh... Me?"

"Yes, you. Despite how Nee-san my look, she's very frail mentally, so please support her. If anything happens to her, I won't forgive you."

"Uh, okay..."

Kagura still did not treat Kyousuke nicely.

"Personally, I have not approved of you. Don't think you can rely on Fuyou's favor and be all full of yourself, okay? You need quite a lot of resolve if you want to become Nee-san's husband. Bluntly stated, you need to be ready to be killed by me."

"Hey wait a sec. I haven't said anything about marrying her--"

"So you're saying Nee-san is not good enough?"

Kagura reached for her metal fan.

"Huh!? No, that's not what I mean--"

"Yeah, look here! Kyousuke already has his true love, yours truly Hikawa Renko! I can't believe you tossed away me, your number one candidate for a wife, and made decisions on your own!?"

"Ayaka can't stand this! Although Eiri-san has risen in points, but she still hasn't caught up with Renko-san. Regarding Onii-chan's marriage, you need to pass Ayaka's permission first!"

"...No, the decision needs to pass through me first. I haven't agreed yet."

Watching Renko and Ayaka yelling angrily, Kyousuke scratched the back of his head.

"Sorry... This must be giving you a headache too, Eiri. With someone like me thrust upon you as a husband candidate, putting my own feelings aside, at least they should think about how you feel--"

"I don't care."

Eiri interrupted Kyousuke indifferently.

Then hugging Puutaro which she had taken from home, presumably to take back to the dorm--

"I, personally... don't really care, you know?"

Eiri went red. Kyousuke was expecting her to go "what a headache. Just go die already" but her ambiguous response puzzled him.

"No wait. It sounds like you're willing to marry me?"

"It kind of does, doesn't it?"

"K-Kind of does..."

The meaning was more and more ambiguous. Just as Kyousuke was at a loss what to do, Eiri tightened her hug. Burying her nose into Puutaro's forehead, she said awkwardly:

"After this incident, I've made my decision. I want to be more upfront and not continue putting up a front. Nothing good will come from forcibly hiding my true feelings at the bottom of my heart... Also, I also thought a lot about things after that. It seems, umm... I don't really hate... you. So, well... As long as you have no objections, I'm probably okay with it... W-What do you think, Kyousuke? Marrying me... Are you opposed to it?"

"Huh?"

Kyousuke gasped in response to the devastating blow.

Confronted with such a sudden surprise attack, his mind was blanked.

Eiri was looked up intently with eyes overflowing with passion, without her usual prickly style. Her expression conveyed worry and she looked docile and obedient.

Kyousuke knew his face was getting hotter and hotter while his gaze began to wander.

"W-Well... Lemme think, now that you mention it..."

" " "------" " "

Eiri, Kagura, Fuyou and the rest of the Akabane were staring at the embarrassed Kyousuke.

Kyousuke's back was breaking out in cold sweat.

"To be honest, m-marrying a girl like Eiri would be--"

"UWAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!? Oh shit~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!?"

Just at that moment, Renko deliberately screamed. Then gruffly, she pulled Kyousuke's right hand--

"Shit, it's so late! We won't make it unless we hurry! Quick, Kyousuke, time to run! No time to dally on the farewell! Shuko--!"

"Huh!? Hey wait--"

"Ahhhhhhhhh!? Seriously, oh no!? Late, late, we're super late! We won't make it unless we hurry!? Run, run, Onii-chan!"

Cooperating with Ayaka who had grabbed Kyousuke's left hand, they dragged Kyousuke outside.

Looking at his watch, Busujima calmly said:

"No it won't. There's plenty of time even if we don't hurry--Ooph!?"

Renko punched Busujima in the gut and forced him to shut up.

"Okay, Eiri, you'd better hurry too! I don't think you want to get disciplined by Kurumiya-sensei, right!?"

"Y-Yeah... I guess..."

Stammering, Eiri wanted to say something, then looked at Fuyou.

With her back to Kyousuke who had been dragged away by Renko and Ayaka--

"Okaa-sama, then I'll be going? Umm... Thank you! I think I've misunderstood you the whole time. I thought you were a very terrifying person, umm... Sorry."

Eiri bowed her head and apologized. Fuyou giggled and covered the corner of her mouth lightly.

"Don't let it weigh on your mind. It is true that I am cruel, however, Eiri... You are the precious and beloved daughter I gave birth to with my beloved husband. Never forget that."

"Yes, Okaa-sama..."

"--Also."

Fuyou's voice lowered slightly as she narrowed those blood-red eyes. Her gaze was directed straight at a certain spot, the girl wearing a black gas mask. Bringing her lips to Eiri's ear, she whispered.

"Don't lose, okay?"

"......Okay."

"Don't worry. Nee-san will win easily. It'll be an instant victory as long as she goes all out... Show them. Show them your charm and power, Nee-san."

"Ahaha... I-I guess you're right? Yes, I will try hard."

"Okay. But it does get boring hanging around that boy all day long... If you have time, come home once in a while, okay? I really look forward to the next time we meet, Nee-san."

"Yes, me too. Take care, okay? Kagura."

"Yes. Same to you, Nee-san, take care--"

Putting Puutaro down on the ground, Eiri hugged Kagura tightly. Kagura hugged her in return and rubbed their cheeks together affectionately.

Fuyou smiled wryly "oh dear, these two children" then waved to Kyousuke's group.

"Thank you, everyone, for staying at our humble abode. You are welcome to visit any time again in the future. Also, Kyousuke-san, you must come as the husband next time. Fufufu."

"H-Haha..."

"I am counting on you."

Fuyou bowed deeply, but Kyousuke could only respond with a stiff smile.

A prestigious family in the dark side of society, having raised numerous assassins.

Having won this family's approval, Kyousuke could feel that his position was getting farther and farther away from normal everyday life...

Underground Bon Festival - Secret Track

"Ah~ Paradise, paradise. This feels so good..."

Meanwhile, across oceans, inside a luxury hotel in a certain country...

Lying on a bed in the hotel room over a bath towel while receiving a full body treatment and massage, Hikawa Reiko gave off sounds of pleasure.

She was not wearing any clothing. With essential oils applied, her tender and lubricated skin became softer and smoother while a hand, as sturdy as a rock, moved around. Starting from that lovely narrow waist, all the way up to her shoulder blade...

Applying force skillfully, massaging back and forth, it erased all her stress accumulated today.

There was a camomile fragrance resembling that of apples, entering her brain from her nostrils, then turning into an exhaled breath in an endless cycle. As for the background music to accompany the massage, that was, of course--

'...Hey you bitch. What the fuck are you starting to do over there?'

Coming from a cellphone on the table was a slightly mumblilng lolita voice. Towards the speakerphone, Reiko said in leisure:

"I am having a full body massage. Staying in the best suite, enjoying a wonderful time in ecstasy as much as possible!"

'I see. Living the good life... whatever. Hurry and get to the point. You're the one who called me. You must have something important to say.'

"Yes. Actually, it's like this, Hijirin... I've got an unreasonable favor to ask."

'...Hmm.'

"Can you help me out?"

One side asked nervously. The other side immediately responded.

'Of course. As long as it's in my power, ask whatever you want.'

"...Thank you. Then what I'd like to ask you is--"

Halfway through, the dialogue was cut off.

Amidst silence, the masseur's hands moved from the back to the shoulders. Almost twice as large as Reiko's, the giant hand rubbed those tense muscles, bringing wonderful pleasure.

If only time could stop right there...

'...Hey. How much longer are you going to pause there?'

"Oh!? Sorry, I spaced out because it was too comfortable... By the way, where was I?"

'You were talking about a favor to ask, retard! Go to hell!'

"Sorry. Don't be so angry, that'll only build up stress, you know?"

'...Hmph, and you're the cause of it. For the sake of giving Mohican supplementary lessons, these few days have been shit. I'm the one who needs stress relief.'

"Ahaha. That's the problem child you mentioned before, right? The one who loves you so much, Hijirin... Fufu. You two might actually be a good match? A wonderful couple."

'------'

"......Hijirin?"

'Don't ever repeat that again. I don't care if you're joking or not, I won't let you off that easily.'

"Eeek!? S-Sorry..."

The voice exuded dark fury like coming from the abyss of hell. Chatting about that particular student was asking for death, this was something to commit to memory.

'--So? What's the favor you want to ask?'

"Oh that, well, actually... Hmm. It's nothing major."

'Doesn't matter. Spit it out.'

"Okay, okay... Promise me you won't get mad?"

'Fine. Don't worry about your mistake just now. As long as you promise not to repeat, I won't hold it against you. I'm not angry anymore. Think about how long we've known each other. Stop holding back and tell me what you want, Reiko.'

"I want you to sing for me."

'......What the fuck?'

"That's exactly it. I want to hear you sing in your soothing voice, Hijirin. Don't they always play music during massages? I want your singing as the background music."

'--Is there anything else?'

"Nope."

'...........'

"Oh actually, if anything, there is one thing, I don't know if the time to visit your place can be changed to next month... Basically that? But right this moment, that request is still--"

'I refuse.'

"Ehhhhhhhhh, no wayyyyyy!? 'As long as it's in my power, ask whatever you want.' You said that, right? Just now! No way, why won't you help me out!?"

'How can I help you, fucking idiot! Unlike you, who's having your flab pushed around at a spa, I'm buried with work... Just pick your favorite music and listen to it as much as you want! Is this all you want to talk about? I'm hanging up if there isn't, idle hands.'

"Ahhh, wait! Hold on, Hijirin! It's fine if you don't sing, at least chat with me... with your sweet lolita voice, to soothe my ears--uhyaaaaaaaaaah!?"

At this moment, Reiko's body was suddenly flipped over.

From a sprawling position to a face up posture. Having finished with her back, the masseur took some essential oil and applied it to the other side. In other words, what was sandwiched between the body and the bed earlier... the massive bosom--Aiming for those giant breasts that even those gigantic hands could not hold completely, the hands reached without hesitation--

"Ehhhh!? You're picking this timing to rub them!? Hold on, hieeeeeeeeeeeee!?"

'......Bye now.'

"Ahhhh, noooooo! Don't hang uuuuuuup! Please wait! Wait a sec, Hijirin--!"

Ignoring Reiko's wailing, the other side hung up.

"......"

Reiko went limp while the masseur silent massaged her. From the breasts to the collarbone, from the collarbone to the arms, from the arms to the fingertips--While enjoying the comfortable full body massage, Reiko looked up at the masseur. His giant body was over two meters tall with musculature like steel.

The GMK48 band t-shirt he was wearing seemed like it was almost about to burst. The thick armor of muscles was growing on the body. From the extremities of his limbs to his chin, he was covered with tattoos.

"Fufu. It was only a few days ago when I told you to start learning and now you've already mastered it? What amazing learning ability, isn't it? What should I have you learn next?"

"......"

Faced with Reiko's comments, the man remained silent.

Silently massaging his master, that face was--

--*Wearing a ivory-colored gas mask.*

"By the way, you're really great, Renji? It's almost time to take you there. Work a little harder and you'll be able to see your beloved sister, okay? Are you excited?"

"......"

Renji remained unresponsive as earlier. That said, Reiko could feel the hands applying force more gently in the massage. Reiko closed her ice-blue eyes--

"I'm looking forward to it too, Renji... After all, you two siblings stand out especially among the GMK48--the Murderers' Murders. I really want to meet him soon... He must be eliminated as soon as we meet. That pest hanging around my daughter must be eliminated."

Letting her beloved son's fingers take care of her body, Reiko began to slip off into slumber.

Afterword

Hello again, everyone, or perhaps, nice to meet you. I am Mizushiro Mizuki.

Midwinter turns to midsummer and now we have the Bon Festival at the end of the year. Volume 4 is sale date ignores the sense of seasons in the real world and uses Eiri as the cover. Also as an extra, the uniform is taken off and replaced by casual clothing! Hotpants really are like cheating.

Also, this story is designed to be like a side story. Apart from the cover, there are many things different from earlier volumes. The school is not the stage, the characters have changed from convicted murderers to assassins, the color pinup is on a fold-out page, and even one of the main characters, Maina, has been excluded...

Surrounded by so many changes, the afterword still maintains its short page count, and it's time for acknowledgements.

To the editor in charge, Gibu-sama, illustrator Namanie-sama, Musicago Graphics for doing the design, proofreaders, everyone involved with advertising, friends, family, relatives, as well as everyone from various industries involved with helping this book's publishing, readers who like and support PSYCOME--Sincerely, thank you all! Thanks to everyone, this series can apparently continue a bit longer.

Volume 5 is set to be sold next spring. There will be Syamaya the Murderer Princess and various upperclassmen to bring chaos in the sports festival. At the same time, a certain "someone" who has been secretly active behind the scenes in Volumes 3 and 4 will finally enter the stage--That's enough for spoilers. See you next time.

Mizushiro Mizuki ~listening to Enter Shikari while writing~

みなさんも
あざと死
しましたか。

なまにえ。

Translator's Notes and References

1. Might as well explain the puns/additional meanings in the kanji:
Hikawa Renko(氷河煉子): hikawa means "glacier" (possibly a reference to her ice-blue eyes or silver hair) while the "ren" in Renko is the same as for Purgatory(煉獄/rengoku)
Saotome Shinji(早乙女紳士): saotome, a common family name, means "rice planting girl" or simply "young girl" while this way of writing shinji means "gentleman."
Kamiya Ayaka(神谷綾花): kamiya means "god valley."
Akutsu Mari(阿久津真理): mari means "truth" but no idea who this is supposed to be.
Gouriki Ayame(剛力殺女): gouriki means "brute strength" while ayame means "female killer", could this be Bob's real name?
Kamiya Kyousuke(神谷京輔): the suke character means "help" or "assist", perhaps alluding to Kyousuke's helpful nature?
Igarashi Maina(五十嵐舞那): igarashi means "fifty storms" while mai means "dance."
Andou Chihiro(安藤千尋): a fairly standard name, nothing obviously cannibalistic comes to mind.
Akabane Eiri(赤羽鋭利): akabane means "red wings" while eiri means "sharp."
Sakagami Touma(逆神闘真): sakagami means "reverse god" or perhaps "opposing god" while tou means "fight/battle" and ma means "truth/true."

2. SUMMER PANIC, a reference to SUMMER SONIC, an annual rock festival.

3. A reference to the advertising slogan of *Weider in*, Japan's best-selling energy jelly drink.

4. Used as the name for a teddy bear here, Puutaro is also slang for hobo or unemployed person.